Jack O'Connell: The Swag from Doc Hawthorne's

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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FEBRUARY

The Bone Witch

R. Garcia y Robertson

Ursula K. Le Guin

Sheila Finch

Laird Barron

Arthur Porges

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Editorial

Gordon Van Gelder

"I'VE NEVER SEEN such a homogenous response to a survey," said Adam the marketing guru when he went over the results of our reader survey. "You don't have a readership — you have a community."

While this observation doesn't come as much of a surprise, it's very nice to hear it from an outside source.

The reader survey we conducted last spring brought a total of 1388 responses from more than two dozen different countries, including a score of readers in Chile. Thanks to all who responded and apologies to everyone who felt the survey was too long. We got a high number of survey responses from people who said they were reluctant to give out their phone numbers or email address, for fear of getting solicitations; this strikes me as a sad comment on our times.

The boring statistical questions we asked about age and income and spending habits yielded two interesting results:

1) The percentage of female readers slipped from 39 percent in 1994 to 33 percent now. I chalk that up to the change from a female editor to a male; the last time a reader survey was conducted under Ed Ferman's editorship, the percentages were closer to the current levels. (Perhaps I'll explore this issue further in a future editorial. There's an article on this subject due out soon from the *SFWA Bulletin*.)

2) The readership has shifted towards the younger end of the scale. Our average reader's age is forty (both mean and median), but the percentage of readers under the age of twenty-five climbed five points, from seven percent up past twelve. Maybe this change is just a reflection of the fact that our last survey wasn't conducted by computer, but I choose to take it as a good sign for the future of the magazine.

Now, if you'll excuse me a second, I'll take off my publisher's hat and put on my editor's cap.

Fortunately, it needn't be a

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helmet; I didn't get too many knocks on the head from the various comments about the magazine's contents. (The fact that my skull is so thick helped, too.) There were plenty of constructive negative comments, but people generally seem to be happy with the fiction we're publishing. Comments like "You are doing very well right now. *F&SF* seems to be publishing more stories of literary merit, regardless of authorship" and "I love this magazine. I can't wait each month for it to arrive" were abundant.

While we did get complaints that we publish too much horror fiction, I was surprised that we weren't deluged with cries for "more science fiction!" — since 1949, that has been one of the consistent pleas from readers. Maybe in the twenty-five years since *Star Wars* debuted, readers no longer differentiate as much between fantasy and sf. As was to be expected, the stories that showed up most often in the list of favorite stories also appeared on the list of least favorites — that's what happens to the memorable ones.

There were more complaints than I expected from readers who object to homosexual subject matter in the fiction. Much as I respect people's different faiths and beliefs, I have to confess that I'm boggled by readers who will seemingly accept any sort of mind-bending behavior from imaginary aliens and yet won't tolerate different behavior from their fellow humans. Then again, one survey respondent said, "To quote one of the magazine's former editors: 'Give us candy, not nice healthy carrots.' And spare me the lectures on racism, homophobia, sexism, etc." So I'll keep quiet and contemplate responses like this one:

> Stories that are a bit more conventional with character in a context with a problem that he either solves by actions or attempts to resolve through action and interaction with other characters are not a sin to publish.

and this one:

> I think it's great that you're taking such an interest in your readers' opinions. At the same time, one of the reasons *F&SF* works as well as it does is that Gordon Van Gelder is a terrific editor; while I think he should take the results of this survey into consideration, please know that I feel that the magazine will be strongest if he still trusts his gut instincts when it comes

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to matters of contents, types of fiction to purchase, etc.

(Last year Harlan Ellison sent me a postcard I keep above my desk. It reads: "Frustra laborat qui omnibus placere studet — He labors in vain who tries to please everyone.")

I was surprised by the number of people who said they'd like to see more editorials from me. I'll do my best to accommodate both of you who asked (hi Mom!), but for me to take pages away from the fiction with my own ramblings, I need something substantial to say. Otherwise, it fails my test of asking, "Who cares?" The death of my cat Darwin, for instance, meant a lot to me, but I'd rather give you more fiction than a few pages of fond memories of the cat.

Our columnists were also deemed healthy in the checkup, although some readers admit they're out of synch with Lucius Shepard's edgy film reviews and a few people don't get Paul Di Filippo's "Plumage from Pegasus" columns. Humor is always one of the hardest forms to assay. Satire opens Friday and closes Saturday. There was some interest in seeing us bring back the competitions; we might try running a few through the Website.

Speaking of the Website, many people suggested that we add a Message Board to our site, and we shall do so soon. The Internet has brought our community closer and we want to encourage the conversation and discussion among our members.

Our survey question that asked how much you would spend for a trip into space brought out more readers' fears of heights and of air travel than we expected. Dr. Asimov was not alone. A few canny people asked if we distinguished between one-way and round-trip rates.

The lucky winner of the lifetime subscription was Simon Massel — long may you enjoy it. Congratulations are also in order for the winners of the other prizes.

Here are two responses that sum things up well:

I regard good magazines as the engine that drives the genre, acting as a forum for ideas and discussion as well as fiction.

Maintain the spirit of the magazine and you'll have (as Jack Williamson) longevity, serendipity and transcendence.

And as for the reader who asked for an occasional swimsuit issue — sorry, you'll have to keep waiting.

– GVG

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Former CIA director Richard Helms said that the American people like a strong intelligence division—so long as the people don't know what they do. Here Laid Barron introduces us to an old hand in the Intelligence game, and shows us enough of what he does to cause some sleepless nights.

Old Virginia

By Laird Barron

ON THE THIRD MORNING I noticed that somebody had disabled the truck. All four tires were flattened and the engine was smashed. Nice work.

I had gone outside the cabin to catch the sunrise and piss on some bushes. It was cold; the air tasted like metal. Deep, dark forest at our backs with a few notches for stars. A rutted track wound across a marshy field into more wilderness. Silent except for the muffled hum of the diesel generator behind the wood shed.

"Well, here we go," I said. I fired up a Lucky Strike and congratulated my pessimistic nature. The Reds had found our happy little retreat in the woods. Or possibly, one of my boys was a mole. That would put a pretty bow on things.

The men were already spooked—Davis swore he had heard chuckling and whispering behind the steel door after curfew. He also heard one of the doctors gibbering in a foreign tongue. Nonsense, of course. Nonetheless, the troops were edgy, and now this.

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"Garland? You there?" Hatcher called from the porch in a low voice. He made a tall, thin silhouette.

"Over here." I waited for him to join me by the truck. Hatcher was my immediate subordinate and the only member of the detail I'd personally worked with. He was tough, competent, and a decade my junior — which made him twice as old as the other men. If somebody here was a Red I hoped to God it wasn't him.

"Guess we're hoofing it," he commented after a quick survey of the damage.

I passed him a cigarette. We smoked in contemplative silence. Eventually I said, "Who took last watch?"

"Richards. He didn't report any activity."

"Yeah." I stared into the forest and wondered if the enemy was lurking. What would be their next move, and how might I counter? A chill tightened the muscles in the small of my back, reminded me of how things had gone wrong during '53 in the steamy hills of Cuba. It had been six years, and in this business a man didn't necessarily improve with age. I said, "How did they find us, Hatch?"

"Strauss may have a leak. The Reds are conducting similar programs. Information from here would carry a hefty price tag behind the Curtain...."

Suddenly this little field trip didn't seem like a babysitting detail anymore.

Project TALLHAT was a Company job, but black ops. Dr. Herman Strauss had picked the team in secret and briefed us at his own home. Now here we were in the wilds of West Virginia standing watch over two of his personal staff while they conducted unspecified research on a senile crone. Doctors Porter and Riley called the shots. There was to be no communication with the outside world until they had gathered sufficient data. Upon return to Langley, Strauss would handle the debriefing. Absolutely no one else inside the Company was to be involved.

This wasn't my kind of operation, but I had seen the paperwork and recognized Strauss's authority. Why me? I suspected it was because Strauss had known me since the first big war. He also knew I was past it, ready for pasture. Maybe this was his way to make me feel important one last time. Gazing at the ruined truck and all it portended, I started

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thinking maybe good old Herman had picked me because I was expendable.

I stubbed out my cigarette and made some quick decisions. "When it gets light, we sweep the area. You take Robey and Neil and arc south; I'll go north with Dox and Richards. Davis will guard the cabin. We'll establish a quarter-mile perimeter; search for tracks."

Hatcher nodded. He didn't state the obvious flaw — what if Davis was playing for the other team? He gestured at the forest. "How about an emergency extraction? We're twenty miles from the nearest traveled road. We could make it in a few hours. I saw some farms; one will have a phone — "

"Hatch, they destroyed the vehicle for a reason. Obviously they *want* us to walk. Who knows what nasty surprise is waiting down that road? For now we stay here, fortify. If worse comes to worst, we break and scatter. Maybe one of us will make it to HQ."

"How do we handle Porter and Riley?"

"This has become a security issue. Let's see what we find; then I'll break the news to the good doctors."

My involvement in Operation TALLHAT was innocent — if you can ever say that about Company business. I was lounging on an out-of-season New York beach when the telegram arrived. Strauss sent a car from Virginia. An itinerary; spending money. The works. I was intrigued; it had been several years since the last time I spoke with Herman.

Director Strauss said he needed my coolness under pressure when we sat down to a four-star dinner at his legendary farmhouse in Langley. Said he needed an older man, a man with poise. Yeah, he poured it on all right.

Oh, the best had said it too — *Put his feet to the fire; he doesn't flinch. Garland, he's one cool sonofabitch.* Yes indeed, they had said it — thirty years ago. Before the horn rims got welded to my corrugated face and before the arthritis bent my fingers. Before my left ear went dead and my teeth fell out. Before the San Andreas Fault took root in my hands and gave them tremors. It was difficult to maintain deadly aloofness when I had to get up and drain my bladder every hour on the hour. Some war hero. Some Company legend.

"*Look, Roger, I don't care about Cuba. It's ancient history, pal.*"

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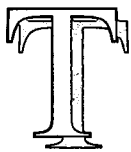
Sitting across the table from Strauss at his farmhouse with a couple whiskey sours in my belly it had been too easy to believe my colossal blunders were forgiven. That the encroaching specter of age was an illusion fabricated by jealous detractors, of which great men have plenty.

I had been a great man, once. Veteran of not one, but two World Wars. Decorated, lauded, feared. Strauss, earnest, blue-eyed Strauss, convinced me some greatness lingered. He leaned close and said, *"Roger, have you ever heard of MKULTRA?"*

And I forgot about Cuba.



HE MEN DRESSED in hunting jackets to ward the chill, loaded shotguns for possible unfriendly contact, and scouted the environs until noon. Fruitless; the only tracks belonged to deer and rabbits. Most of the leaves had fallen in carpets of red and brown. It drizzled. Black branches dripped. The birds had nothing to say.

I observed Dox and Richards. Dox lumbered in plodding engineer boots, broad Slavic face blankly concentrated on the task I had given him. He was built like a tractor; too simple to work for the Company except as an enforcer, much less be a Russian saboteur. I liked him. Richards was blond and smooth, an Ivy League talent with precisely enough cynicism and latent sadism to please the forward-thinking elements who sought to reshape the Company in the wake of President Eisenhower's imminent departure. Richards I didn't trust or like.

There was a major housecleaning in the works. Men of Richards's caliber were preparing to sweep fossils such as myself into the dustbin of history.

It was perfectly logical after a morbid fashion. The trouble had started at the top with good old Ike suffering a stroke. Public reassurances to the contrary, the commander in chief was reduced to a shell of his former power. Those closest saw the cracks in the foundation and moved to protect his already tottering image. Company loyalists closed ranks, covering up evidence of the President's diminished faculties, his strange preoccupation with drawing caricatures of Dick Nixon. They stood by at his public appearances, ready to swoop in if he did anything too embarrassing. Not a happy allocation of human resources in the view of the younger members of the intelligence community.

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That kind of duty didn't appeal to the Richardses of the world. They preferred to cut their losses and get back to slicing throats and cracking codes. Tangible objectives that would further the dominance of U.S. intelligence.

We kept walking and not finding anything until the cabin dwindled to a blot. The place had been built at the turn of the century; Strauss bought it for a song, I gathered. The isolation suited his nefarious plots. Clouds covered the treetops, yet I recalled mention of a mountain not far off. A low, shaggy hump called Badger Hill. There would be collapsed mines and the moldered bones of abandoned camps, rusted hulks of machinery along the track. Dense woods. A world of brambles and deadfalls. No one came out this way anymore. Hadn't in years.

We rendezvoused with Hatcher's party at the cabin. They hadn't discovered any clues either. Our clothes were soaked, our moods somber, although traces of excitement flickered among the young Turks — attack dogs sniffing for a fight.

None of them had been in a war. I'd checked. College instead of Korea for the lot. Even Dox had been spared by virtue of flat feet. They hadn't seen Soissons in 1915, Normandy in 1945, nor the jungles of Cuba in 1953. They hadn't seen the things I had seen. Their fear was the small kind, borne of uncertainty rather than dread. They stroked their shotguns and grinned with dumb innocence.

When the rest had been dispatched for posts around the cabin I broke for the latrine to empty my bowels. Close race. I sweated and trembled and required some minutes to compose myself. My knees were on fire, so I broke out a tin of bootleg DMSO and rubbed them, tasting the garlic of it on my tongue. I wiped beads of moisture from my glasses, swallowed a glycerin tablet, and felt as near to one hundred percent as I would ever be.

Ten minutes later I summoned Dr. Porter for a conference on the back porch. It rained harder, shielding our words from Neil who stood post near an oak.

Porter was lizard-bald except for a copper circlet that trailed wires into his breast pocket. His white coat bore stains and smudges. His fingers were blue-tinged with chalk dust. He stank of antiseptic. We were not friends. He treated the detail as a collection of thugs best endured for the sake of his great scientific exploration.

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I relayed the situation, which did not impress him much. "This is why Strauss wanted your services. Deal with the problem," he said.

"Yes, Doctor. I am in the process of doing that. However, I felt you might wish to know your research will become compromised if this activity escalates. We may need to extract."

"Whatever you think best, Captain Garland." He smiled a dry smile. "You'll inform me when the moment arrives?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll continue my work, if you're finished." The way he lingered on the last syllable left no doubt that I was.

I persisted, perhaps from spite. "Makes me curious about what you fellows are up to. How's the experiment progressing? Getting anywhere?"

"Captain Garland, you shouldn't be asking me these questions." Porter's humorless smile was more reptilian than ever.

"Probably not. Unfortunately, since recon proved inconclusive I don't know who wrecked our transport or what they plan next. More information regarding the project would be helpful."

"Surely Dr. Strauss told you everything he deemed prudent."

"Times change."

"TALLHAT is classified. You're purely a security blanket. You possess no special clearance."

I sighed and lighted a cigarette. "I know some things. MKULTRA is an umbrella term for the Company's mind control experiments. You psych boys are playing with all kinds of neat stuff — LSD, hypnosis, photokinetics. Hell, we talked about using this crap against Batista. Maybe we did."

"Indeed. Castro was amazingly effective, wasn't he?" Porter's eyes glittered. "So what's your problem, Captain?"

"The problem is the KGB has pretty much the same programs. And better ones from the scuttlebutt I pick up at Langley."

"Oh, you of all people should beware rumors. Loose lips had *you* buried in Cuba with the rest of your operatives. Yet here you are."

I understood Porter's game. He hoped to gig me with the kind of talk most folks were polite enough to whisper behind my back, make me lose control. I wasn't biting. "The way I figure it, the Reds don't need TALLHAT...unless you're cooking up something special. Something

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they're afraid of. Something they're aware of, at least tangentially, but lack full intelligence. And in that case, why pussyfoot around? They've got two convenient options — storm in and seize the data or wipe the place off the map."

Porter just kept smirking. "I am certain the Russians would kill to derail our project. However, don't you think it would be more efficacious for them to use subtlety? Implant a spy to gather pertinent details, steal documents. Kidnap a member of the research team and interrogate him; extort information from him with a scandal. Hiding in the woods and slicing tires seems a foolish waste of surprise."

I didn't like hearing him echo the bad thoughts I'd had while lingering in the outhouse. "Exactly, Doctor. The situation is even worse than I thought. We are being stalked by an unknown quantity."

"Stalked? How melodramatic. An isolated incident doesn't prove the hypothesis. Take more precautions if it makes you happy. And I'm confident you are quite happy; awfully boring to be a watchdog with nothing to bark at."

It was too much. That steely portion of my liver gained an edge, demanded satisfaction. I took off the gloves. "I want to see the woman."

"Whatever for?" Porter's complacent smirk vanished. His thin mouth drew down with suspicion.

"Because I do."

"Impossible!"

"Hardly. I command six heavily armed men. Any of them would be tickled to kick down the door and give me a tour of your facilities." It came out much harsher than I intended. My nerves were frayed and his superior demeanor had touched a darker kernel of my soul. "Dr. Porter, I read your file. That was my condition for accepting this assignment; Strauss agreed to give me dossiers on everyone. You and Riley slipped through the cracks after Caltech. I guess the school wasn't too pleased with some of your research or where you dug up the financing. Then that incident with the kids off campus. The ones who thought they were testing diet pills. You gave them, what was it? Oh yes — peyote! Pretty strange behavior for a pair of physicists, eh? It follows that Unorthodox Applications of Medicine and Technology would snap you up after the private sector turned its back. So excuse my paranoia."

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"Ah, you do know a *few* things. But not the nature of TALLHAT? Odd."

"We shall rectify that momentarily."

Porter shrugged. "As you wish, Mr. Garland. I shall include your threats in my report."

For some reason his acquiescence didn't really satisfy me. True, I had turned on the charm that earned me the title "Jolly Roger," yet he had caved far too easily. Damn it!

Porter escorted me inside. Hatcher saw the look on my face and started to rise from his chair by the window. I shook my head and he sank, fixing Porter with a dangerous glare.

The lab was sealed off by a thick steel door, like the kind they use on trains. Spartan, each wall padded as if a rubber room in an asylum. It reeked of chemicals. The windows were blocked with black plastic. Illumination seeped from a phosphorescent bar on the table. Two cots. Shelves, cabinets, a couple of boxy machines with needles and tickertape spools. Between these machines an easel with indecipherable scrawls done in ink. I recognized some as calculus symbols. To the left, a poster bed, and on the bed a thickly wrapped figure propped by pillows. A mummy.

Dr. Riley drifted in, obstructing my view of the subject — an aquamarine phantom, eyes and mouth pools of shadow. As with Porter, a copper circlet winked on his brow. "Afternoon, Captain Garland. Pull up a rock." His accent was Midwestern nasal. He even wore cowboy boots under his grimy lab coat.

"Captain Garland wants to view the subject," Porter said.

"Fair enough!" Riley seemed pleased. He rubbed his hands, a pair of disembodied starfish in the weirding glow. "Don't fret, Porter. There's no harm in satisfying the captain's curiosity." With that, the lanky man stepped aside.

Approaching the figure on the bed, I was overcome with an abrupt sensation of vertigo. My hackles bunched. The light played tricks upon my senses, lending a fishbowl distortion to the old woman's sallow visage. They had secured her in a straitjacket; her head lolled drunkenly, dead eyes frozen, tongue drooling from slack lips. She was shaved bald, white stubble of a Christmas goose.

My belly quaked. "Where did you find her?" I whispered, as if she might hear me.

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"What's the matter?" Dr. Riley asked.

"Where did you find her, goddamnit!"

The crone's head swiveled on that too-long neck and her milky gaze fastened upon my voice. And she grinned, toothless. Horrible.

HATCHER KEPT some scotch in the pantry. Dr. Riley poured — I didn't trust my own hands yet. He lighted cigarettes. We sat at the living room table, alone in the cabin but for Porter and Subject X behind the metal door. Porter was so disgusted by my reaction he refused to speak with me. Hatcher had assembled the men in the yard; he was giving some sort of pep talk. Ever the soldier. I wished I'd had him in Cuba.

It rained and a stiff breeze rattled the eaves.

"Who is she to you?" Riley asked. His expression was shrewd.

I sucked my cigarette to the filter in a single drag, exhaled and gulped scotch. Held out my glass for another three fingers' worth. "You're too young to remember the first big war."

"I was a baby." Riley handed me another cigarette without being asked.

"Yeah? I was twenty-eight when the Germans marched into France. Graduated Rogers and Williams with full honors, was commissioned into the Army as an officer. They stuck me right into intelligence, sent me straight to the front." I chuckled bitterly. "This happened before Uncle Sam decided to make an 'official' presence. Know what I did? I helped organize the resistance, translated messages French intelligence intercepted. Mostly I ran from the advance. Spent a lot of time hiding out on farms when I was lucky, field ditches when I wasn't.

"There was this one family, I stayed with them for nine days in June. It rained, just like this. A large family — six adults, ten or eleven kids. I bunked in the wine cellar and it flooded. You'd see these huge bloody rats paddling if you clicked the torch. Long nine days." If I closed my eyes I knew I would be there again in the dark, among the chittering rats. Listening for armor on the muddy road, the tramp of boots.

"So what happened?" Riley watched me. He probably guessed where this was headed.

"The family matriarch lived in a room with her son and daughter-in-law. The old dame was blind and deaf; she'd lost her wits. They bandaged

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her hands so she couldn't scratch herself. She sucked broth out of this gnawed wooden bowl they kept just for her. Jesus Mary, I still hear her slobbering over that bowl. She used to lick her bowl and stare at me with those dead eyes."

"Subject X bears no relation to her, I assure you."

"I don't suppose she does. I looked at her more closely and saw I was mistaken. But for those few seconds.... Riley, something's going on. Something much bigger than Strauss indicated. Level with me. What are you people searching for?"

"Captain, you realize my position. I've been sworn to silence. Strauss will cut off my balls if I talk to you about TALLHAT. Or we could all simply disappear."

"It's that important."

"It is." Riley's face became gentle. "I'm sorry. Dr. Strauss promised us ten days. One week from tomorrow we pack up our equipment and head back to civilization. Surely we can hold out."

The doctor reached across to refill my glass; I clamped his wrist. They said I was past it, but he couldn't break my grip. I said, "All right, boy. We'll play it your way for a while. If the shit gets any thicker, though, I'm pulling the plug on this operation. You got me, son?"

He didn't say anything. Then he jerked free and disappeared behind the metal door. He returned with a plain brown folder, threw it on the table. His smile was almost triumphant. "Read these. It won't tell you everything. Still, it's plenty to chew on. Don't show Porter, okay?" He walked away without meeting my eye.

Dull wet afternoon wore into dirty evening. We got a pleasant fire going in the potbellied stove and dried our clothes. Roby had been a short order cook in college, so he fried hamburgers for dinner. After, Hatcher and the boys started a poker game and listened to the radio. The weather forecast called for more of the same, if not worse.

Perfect conditions for an attack. I lay on my bunk reading Riley's file. I got a doozy of a migraine. Eventually I gave up and filled in my evening log entry. The gears were turning.

I wondered about those copper circlets the doctors wore. Fifty-plus years of active service and I'd never seen anything quite like them. They

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reminded me of rumors surrounding the German experiments in Auschwitz. Mengele had been fond of bizarre contraptions. Maybe we'd read his mail and adopted some ideas.

Who is Subject X? I wrote this in the margin of my log. I thought back on what scraps Strauss fed me. I hadn't asked enough questions, that was for damned sure. You didn't quiz a man like Strauss. He was one of the Grand Old Men of the Company. He got what he wanted, when he wanted it. He'd been everywhere, had something on everyone. When he snapped his fingers, things happened. People that crossed him became scarce.

Strauss was my last supporter. Of course I let him lead me by the nose. For me, the gold watch was a death certificate. Looking like a meatier brother of Herr Mengele, Strauss had confided the precise amount to hook me. *"Ten days in the country. I've set up shop at my cabin near Badger Hill. A couple of my best men are on to some promising research. Important research — "*

"Are we talking about psychotropics? I've seen what can happen. I won't be around that again."

"No, no. We've moved past that. This is different. They will be monitoring a subject for naturally occurring brain activity. Abnormal activity, yes, but not induced by us."

"These doctors of yours, they're just recording results?"

"Exactly."

"Why all the trouble, Herman? You've got the facilities right here. Why send us to a shack in the middle of Timbuktu?"

"Ike is on his way out the door. Best friend a covert ops man ever had, too. The Powers Soon to Be will put an end to MKULTRA. Christ, the office is shredding documents around the clock. I've been given word to suspend all operations by the end of next month. Next month!"

"Nobody else knows about TALLHAT?"

"And nobody can — not unless we make a breakthrough. I wish I could come along, conduct the tests myself — "

"Not smart. People would talk if you dropped off the radar. What does this woman do that's so bloody important?"

"She's a remote viewer. A clairvoyant. She draws pictures, the researchers extrapolate."

"Whatever you're looking for — "

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"It's momentous. So you see, Roger! I need you. I don't trust anyone else."

"Who is the subject?"

"Her name is Virginia."

I rolled over and regarded the metal door. She was in there, staring holes through steel.

"Hey, Cap! You want in? I'm getting my ass kicked over here!" Hatcher puffed on a Havana cigar and shook his head while Davis raked in another pot. There followed a chorus of crude imprecations for me to climb down and take my medicine.

I feigned good humor. "Not tonight, fellows. I didn't get my nap. You know how it is with us old folks."

They laughed. I shivered until sleep came. My dreams were bad.

I spent most of the fourth day perusing Riley's file. It made things about as clear as mud. All in all a cryptic collection of papers — just what I needed right then; more spooky errata.

Numerous mimeographed letters and library documents comprised the file. The bulk of them were memos from Strauss to Porter. Additionally, some detailed medical examinations of Subject X. I didn't follow the jargon except to note that the terms "unclassified" and "of unknown origin" reappeared often. They made interesting copy, although they explained nothing to my layman's eyes.

Likewise the library papers seemed arcane. One such entry from *A Colonial History of Carolina and Her Settlements* went thusly:

The Lost Roanoke Colony vanished from the Raleigh Township on Roanoke Island between 1588 and 1589. Governor White returned from England after considerable delays to find the town abandoned. Except for untended cookfires that burned down a couple houses, there was no evidence of struggle, though Spaniards and natives had subsequently plundered the settlement. No bodies or bones were discovered. The sole clue as to the colonists' fate lay in a strange sequence of letters carved into a palisade — Croatoan. The word CRO had been similarly carved into a nearby tree. White surmised this indicated a flight to the Croatoan Island, called Hatteras by natives. Hurricanes prevented a search until the next colonization attempt two years later. Subsequent investigation

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yielded no answers, although scholars suggest local tribes assimilated the English settlers. No physical evidence exists to support this theory. It remains a mystery of some magnitude....

Tons more like that. It begged the question of why Strauss, brilliant, cruel-minded Strauss, would waste a molecular biologist, a physicist, a bona fide psychic, and significant monetary resources on moldy folklore.

I hadn't a notion and this worried me mightily.

That night I dreamt of mayhem. First I was at the gray farmhouse in Soissons, eating dinner with a nervous family. My French was inadequate. Fortunately one of the women knew English and we were able to converse. A loud slurping began to drown out conversation about German spies. At the head of the table sat Virginia, sipping from a broken skull. She winked. A baby cried.

Then it was Cuba and the debacle of advising Castro's guerillas for an important raid. My intelligence network had failed to account for a piece of government armor. The guerillas were shelled to bits by Batista's garrison and young Castro barely escaped with his life. Five of my finest men were ground up in the general slaughter. Two were captured and tortured. They died without talking. Lucky for me.

I heard them screaming inside a small cabin in the forest, but I couldn't find the door. Someone had written CROATOAN on the wall.

I bumped into Hatcher, hanging upside down from a tree branch. He wore an I LIKE IKE button. "Help me, Cap," he said.

A baby squalled. Virginia sat in a rocking chair on the porch, soothing the infant. The crone's eyes were holes in dough. She drew a nail across her throat.

I sat up in bed, throttling a shriek. I hadn't uttered a cry since being shot in World War I. It was pitchy in the cabin. People were fumbling around in the dark.

Hatcher shined a flashlight my direction. "The generator's tits up." Nearby, the doctors were already bitching and cursing their misfortune.

We never did find out if it was sabotaged or not.

The fifth day was uneventful.

* * *

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On the sixth morning my unhappy world raveled.

Things were hopping right out of the gate. Dr. Riley joined Hatcher and me for breakfast. A powerful stench accompanied him. His expression was unbalanced, his angular face white and shiny. He grabbed a plate of cold pancakes, began wolfing them. Lanky hair fell into his eyes. He grunted like a pig.

Hatcher eased his own chair back. I spoke softly to Riley, "Hey now, Doc. Roby can whip up more. No rush."

Riley looked at me sidelong. He croaked, "She made us take them off."

I opened my mouth. His circlet was gone. A pale stripe of untanned flesh. "Riley, what are you talking about?" Even as I spoke, Hatcher stood quietly, drew his pistol, and glided for the lab.

"Stupid old bastards." Riley gobbled pancakes, chunks dropping from his lips. He giggled until tears squirted, rubbed the dimple in his forehead. "Those were shields, Pops. They produced a frequency that kept her from...doing things to us." He stopped eating again, cast sharp glances around the room. "Where are your little soldiers?"

"On patrol."

"Ha, ha. Better call them back, Pops."

"Why do you say that?"

"You'd just better."

Hatcher returned, grim. "Porter has taken Subject X."

I put on my glasses. I drew my revolver. "Dr. Riley, Mr. Hatcher is going to secure you. It's for your own safety. I must warn you, give him any static and I'll burn you down."

"That's right, Jolly Roger! You're an ace at blowing people away! What's the number up to, Captain? Since the first Big One? And we're counting children, okay?" Riley barked like a lunatic coyote until Hatcher cracked him on the temple with the butt of his gun. The doctor flopped, twitching.

I uncapped my glycerin and ate two.

Hatcher was all business. He talked in his clipped manner while he handcuffed Riley to a center beam post. "Looks like he broke out through the window. No signs of struggle."

"Documents?"

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"Seems like everything's intact. Porter's clothes are on his cot. Found her straitjacket too."

Porter left his clothes? I liked this less and less.

Rain splattered the dark windows. "Let's gather everybody. Assemble a hunting party." I foresaw a disaster; it would be difficult to follow tracks in the storm. Porter might have allies. Best case scenario had him and the subject long gone, swooped up by welcoming Commie arms and out of my sorry life forever. Instinct whispered that I was whistling Dixie if I fell for that scenario. *Now you're screwed, blued, and tattooed, chum!* chortled my inner voice.

Hatcher grasped my shoulder. "Cap, you call it, we haul it. I can tell you, the boys are aching for a scrap. It won't hurt anybody's feelings to hunt the traitor to ground."

"Agreed. We'll split into two-man teams, comb the area. Take Porter alive if possible. I want to know who he's playing for."

"Sounds good. Someone has to cover the cabin."

He meant I should be the one to stay back. They had to move fast. I was the old man, the weak link; I'd slow everybody down, maybe get a team member killed.

I mustered what grace I possessed. "I'll do it. Come on; we better get moving." We called the men together and laid it on the table. Everybody appeared shocked that Porter had been able to pull off such a brazen escape.

I drew a quick plan and sent them trotting into the wind-blasted dawn. Hatcher wasn't eager to leave me alone, but there weren't sufficient bodies to spare. He promised to report back inside of three hours one way or the other.

And they were gone.

I locked the doors, pulled the shutters, peeking through the slats as it lightened into morning.

Riley began laughing again. Deeper this time, from his skinny chest. The rank odor oozing from him would have gagged a goat. "How about a cigarette, Cap?" His mouth squirmed. His face had slipped from white to gray. He appeared to have been bled. The symptoms were routine.

"They'll find your comrade," I said. A cigarette sounded like a fine idea, so I lighted one for myself and smoked it. I kept an eye on him and

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one on the yard. "Yeah, they'll nail him sooner or later. And when they do...." I let it dangle.

"God, Cap! The news is true. You are so washed up! They say you were sharp back in the day. Strauss didn't even break a sweat, keeping you in the dark, did he? Think about it — why do you suppose I gave you the files, huh? Because it didn't matter one tin shit. He told me to give you anything you asked for. Said it would make things more interesting."

"Tell me the news, Riley."

"Can't you guess the joke? Our sweet Virginia ain't what she seems, no sir."

"What is she, then?"

"She's a weapon, Cap. A nasty, nasty weapon. Strauss is ready to bet the farm this little filly can win the Cold War for Team U.S.A. But first we had to test her, see." He banged his greasy head against the post and laughed wildly. "Our hats were supposed to protect us from getting brain-buggered. Strauss went through hell — and a *heap* of volunteers — to configure them properly. They should've worked...I don't know why they stopped functioning correctly. Bum luck. Doesn't matter."

"Where did Porter take her?"

"Porter didn't take Virginia. She took him. She'll be back for you."

"Is Subject X really a clairvoyant?" My lips were dry. Too many blocks were clicking into place at once.

"She's clairvoyant. She's a lot of things. But Strauss tricked you — we aren't here to test her ability to locate needles in haystacks. You'd die puking if you saw...."

"Is there anyone else? Does Porter have allies waiting?"

"Porter? Porter's meat. It's *her* you better worry about."

"Fine. Does *she* have allies?

"No. She doesn't need help." Riley drifted. "Should've seen the faces on those poor people. Strauss keeps some photographs in a safe. Big stack. Big. It took so long to get the hats right. He hired some hardcases to clean up the mess. Jesus, Cap. I never would've believed there were worse characters than you."

"Strauss is careful," I said. "It must have taken years."

"About fifteen or so. Even the hardcases could only deal with so many corpses. And the farm; well, it's rather high profile. These three Company

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guys handled disposals. Three that I met, anyway. These fellows started getting nervous, started acting hinky. Strauss made her get rid of them. This was no piece of cake. Those sonsofbitches wanted to live, let me tell you." He grew quiet and swallowed. "She managed, but it was awful, and Strauss decided she required field testing. She required more 'live' targets, is how he put it. Porter and me knew he meant Company men. Black ops guys nobody would miss. Men who were trained like the Reds and the Jerries are trained. Real killers."

"Men like me and my team," I said.

"Gold star!" He cackled, drumming the heels of his Stetsons against the planks. His hilarity coarsened into shrieks. Muscles stood in knots on his arms and neck. "Oh God! She rode us all night — oh Christ!" He became unintelligible. The post creaked with the strain of his thrashing.

I found the experience completely unnerving. Better to stare through the watery pane where trees took shape as light fell upon their shoulders. My bladder hurt; too fearful to step outside, I found a coffee can and relieved myself. My hands shook and I spilled a bit.

The man's spasms peaked and he calmed by degrees. I waited until he seemed lucid, said, "Let me help you, Riley. Tell me what Porter — what she — did. Are you poisoned?" There was a bad thought. Say Porter had slipped a touch of the pox into our water supply...I ceased that line of conjecture. Pronto.

"She rode us, Cap. Aren't you listening to ME?" He screeched the last, frothing. "I want to die now." His chin drooped and he mumbled incoherently.

I let him be. *How now, brown cow*? I had been so content sitting on that Coney Island beach watching seagulls rip at detritus and waiting for time to expire.

The whole situation had taken on an element of black comedy. Betrayed by that devil Strauss? Sure, he was Machiavelli with a hard-on. I'd seen him put the screws to better men than me. I'd helped him do the deed. Yeah, I was a rube, no doubt. Problem was, I still had not the first idea what had been done to us exactly. Riley was terrified of Virginia. Fair enough, she scared me too. I believed him when he said she could do things — she was possibly a savant, like the idiot math geniuses we locked in labs

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and sweated atom-smashing secrets from. The way her face had changed when I first saw her convinced me of this.

She's a weapon, a nasty, nasty weapon. I didn't know what that meant. I didn't care much, either. Something bad had happened to Riley. Whether Virginia had done it, whether Porter had done it, or if the goddamned KGB was cooking his brain with EM pulses, we were in the soup. How to escape the pot was my new priority.

I settled in with my shotgun to wait. And plan.

Nobody returned from the morning expedition.

Around 1700 hours I decided that I was screwed. The operation was compromised, its principal subject missing. The detail assigned to guard the principal was also missing and likely dead or captured.

What to do? I did what we intelligence professionals always did at moments like this. I started a fire in the stove and began burning documents. In forty-five minutes all paper records of Operation TALLHAT were coals. This included my personal log. Dr. Riley observed this without comment. He lapsed into semi-consciousness before I finished.

Unfortunately I decided to check him for wounds.

Don't know what possessed me. I was sort of like a kid poking a dead animal with a stick. I was *compelled*. Cautiously I lifted his shirt and found three holes in his back — one in the nape of his neck, two at the base of his spine. Each was the diameter of a walnut and oozed dark blood. They stank of rotten flesh, of gangrene.

She rode us all night, Cap!

Thank God for decades of military discipline — the machinery took over. If a soldier could regard the charred corpses of infant flame-thrower victims and maintain his sanity, a soldier could stomach a few lousy holes in a man's spine. I detached myself from this gruesome spectacle and the realization that this was the single most monumental balls-up of my career. What a way to go out!

I determined to make a break for the main road. A twenty-mile hike, more, since I dared not use the main track, but certainly within my range. At that point, I was certain I could sprint the distance if necessary. Yeah, best idea I'd had so far.

"Cap, help me." Hatcher's voice muffled by rain against the roof.

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I limped to the window. The light had deteriorated. I made him out, standing a few yards away between some trees. His arms were spread as if in greeting — then I saw the rope.

"Cap! Help me!" His face was alabaster, glowing in the dusk.

I began a shout, but was interrupted by an ominous thump of displaced weight behind me. My heart sank.

"Yes, Cap. Help him," Virginia crooned.

I turned and beheld her. Her naked skull scraped the ceiling. A wizened child, grinning and drooling. She towered because she sat upon Dox's broad back, her yellow nails digging at his ears. His expression was flaccid as he bore down on me.

The shotgun jumped in my hands and made its terrible racket. Then Dox's fingers closed over my throat and night fell.

I DID NOT DREAM of Cuba or the failed attack on Batista's garrison. Nor did I dream of walking through the black winter of Dresden surrounded by swirling flakes of ash. I didn't dream of Soissons with its muddy ditches and rats.

I dreamt of people marching single file across a field. Some dressed quaintly; others had forgotten their shoes. Many had forgotten to dress at all. Their faces were blank as snow. They stumbled. At least a hundred men, women and children. Marching without speaking. A great hole opened in the ground before them. It stank of carrion. One by one the people came to this hole, swayed, and toppled into the cavity. Nobody screamed.

I woke to see the cabin wall flickering in lamplight. Blurry, for my glasses were lost. Something was wrong with my legs; they were paralyzed. I suspected my back was broken. At least there was no pain.

The numbness seemed to encompass my senses as well — the fear was still present, but submerged and muzzled. Glacial calm stole over me.

"Dr. Riley was misled. Herman never intended this solely as a test." Virginia's voice quavered from somewhere close behind my shoulder.

Her shadow loomed on the wall. A wobbly silhouette that flowed unwholesomely. Floorboards squeaked as she shifted. The thought of

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rolling over brought sweat to my cheeks, so I lay there and watched her shadow in morbid fascination.

"It was also an offering. Mother is pleased. He will be rewarded with a pretty."

"My men," I said. It was difficult to talk, my throat was rusty and bruised.

"With Mother. Except the brute. You killed him. Mother won't take meat unless it's alive. Shame on you, Roger." She chuckled evilly. The sound withdrew slightly, and her shadow shrank. "Oh, your back isn't broken. You'll feel your legs presently. I didn't want you running off before we had a chance to talk."

I envisioned a line of men, Hatcher in the lead, marching through the woods and up a mountain. It rained heavily and they staggered in the mud. No one said anything. Automatons winding down. Ahead yawned a gap in a rocky slope. A dank cave mouth. One by one they went swallowed....

There came a new sound that disrupted my unpleasant daydream — sobbing. It was Riley; smothered as by a gag. I could tell from its frantic nature that Virginia crouched near him. She said to me, "I came back for you, Roger. As for this one, I thought he had provided to his limit...yet he squirms with vigor. Ah, the resilience of life!"

"Who are you?" I asked as several portions of her shadow elongated from the central axis, dipped as questing tendrils. Then, a dim, wet susurration. I thought of pitcher plants grown monstrous and shut my eyes tight.

Riley's noises became shrill.

"Don't be afraid, Roger," Virginia rasped, a bit short of breath. "Mother wants to meet you. Such a vital existence you have pursued! Not often does She entertain provender as seasoned as yourself. If you're lucky, the others will have sated her. She will birth you as a new man. A man in Her image. You'll get old, yes. Being old is a wonderful thing, though. The older you become, the more things you taste. The more you taste, the more pleasure you experience. There is *so much* pleasure to be had."

"Bullshit! If it were such a keen deal, Herman would be cashing in! Not me!"

"Well, Herman is overly cautious. He has reservations about the process. I'll go back and work on him some more."

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"Who are you? Who is your mother?" I said it too loudly, hoping to obscure the commotion Riley was making. The squelching. I babbled, "How did Strauss find you? Jesus!"

"You read the files — I asked the doctors. If you read the files you know where I was born and who I am. You know who Mother is — a colonist wrote Her name on the palisade, didn't he? A name given by white explorers to certain natives who worshipped Her. Idiots! The English are possibly the stupidest people that ever lived." She tittered. "I was the first Christian birth in the New World. I was special. The rest were meat. Poor mama, poor daddy. Poor everyone else. Mother is quite simple, actually. She has basic needs...She birthed me anew, made me better than crude flesh, and now I help her conduct the grand old game. She sent me to find Herman. Herman helps her. I think you could help her too."

"Where is your mother? Is she here?"

"Near. She moves around. We lived on the water for a while. The mountain is nicer, the shafts go so deep. She hates the light. All of Her kind are like that. The miners used to come and She talked with them. No more miners."

I wanted to say something, anything to block Riley's clotted screams. Shortly, his noises ceased. Tears seeped from my clenched eyelids. "D-did the copper circlets ever really work? Or was that part of the joke?" I didn't care about the answer.

Virginia was delighted. "Excellent! Well, they did. That's why I arranged to meet Strauss, to attach myself. He is a clever one! His little devices worked to interfere until we got here, so close to Mother's influence. I am merely a conduit of Her majestic power. She is unimaginable!"

"You mentioned a game...."

Virginia said, "Do you suppose men invented chess? I promise you, there are contests far livelier. I have been to the universities of the world, watching. You have visited the battlefields of the world, watching. Don't you think the time is coming?"

"For what?"

"When mankind will manage to blacken the sky with bombs and cool the Earth so that Mother and Her brothers, Her sisters, and children may emerge once more! Is there any other purpose? Oh, what splendid revelries there shall be on that day!"

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What could I answer with?

Virginia didn't mind. She said, "The dinosaurs couldn't do it in a hundred million years. Nor the sharks in their oceans given ten times that. The monkeys showed promise, but never realized their potential. Humans are the best pawns so far — the ones with a passion for fire and mystery. With subtle guidance they — you — can return this world to the paradise it was when the ice was thick and the sun dim. We need men like Adolph, and Herman, and their sweet sensibilities. Men who would bring the winter darkness so they might caper around bonfires. Men like you, dear Roger. Men like you." Virginia ended on a cackle.

Hiroshima bloomed upon my mind's canvas and I nearly cried aloud. And Auschwitz, and Verdun, and all the rest. Yes, the day was coming. "You've got the wrong man," I said in my bravest tone. "You don't know the first thing. I'm a bloody patriot."

"Mother appreciates that, dear Roger. Be good and don't move. I'll return in a moment. Must fetch you a coat. It's raining." Virginia's shadow slipped into the lab. There followed the clatter of upturned objects and breaking glass.

Her brothers, Her sisters, and children. Pawns. Provender. My gorge tasted bitter. Herman helping creatures such as this bring about hell on Earth. For what? Power? The promise of immortality? Virginia's blasphemous longevity should've cured him of that desire.

Oh, Herman, you fool! On its heels arrived the notion that perhaps I would change my mind after a conversation with Mother. That one day soon I might sit across the table from Strauss and break bread in celebration of a new dawn.

I wept as I pulled my buck knife free, snicked the catch. Would that I possessed the courage to slit my own wrists! I attempted to do just that, but lacked the conviction to carry through. Seventy years of self-aggrandizement had robbed me of any will to self-destruction.

So, I began to carve a message into the planks instead. A warning. Although what could one say about events this bizarre? This hideous? I shook with crazed laughter and nearly broke the blade with my furious hacking.

I got as far as CRO before Virginia came and rode me into the woods to meet her mother. ⚚

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Lovely Bones, by Alice Sebold, Little, Brown, 2002, $21.95.

SOMETIMES I think I live in something of a literary vacuum. Alice Sebold's debut novel is a good example. I picked it up because of a short, paragraph-long, pre-publication description I'd read somewhere: it sounded intriguing. I had no idea how she was going to pull off a coming-of-age book about a dead girl who is brutally murdered in the first few chapters and spends the rest of the book as a spirit, observing and trying to protect her family from the murderer.

Considering the book's description, it seemed particularly odd that the novel was described as uplifting and light-hearted, for all the grim events upon which the story is based.

Well, all of the above is true. Sebold has given her protagonist Susie Salmon a delightful voice, and peopled the book with a wonderful and well-realized cast of characters, and she does manage to tell a coming-of-age story about a dead girl. Her take on heaven is fascinating. As is her ability to mix truly horrific and tense scenes with a light narrative voice with neither taking away from the other.

I pretty much fell in love with the book. And then I started to notice all the mainstream interest in her and the novel and realized that I wasn't alone — not by a long shot. The positive praise lavished on *The Lovely Bones* is strong and well-deserved. But what I found the most interesting is that this book has about as fantastical a basis as anything in our genre, but that's...not exactly ignored in the mainstream reviews, but it isn't dwelled upon either.

They don't ignore the fact that the book is narrated by a dead girl. Instead, they simply accept it and move on to discussing the characters and story. As, apparently, do

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the novel's growing legion of readers.

It's a curious phenomenon that I've noticed before, particularly with films. A surprising percentage of movies over the past few years are of a fantastical nature *(Amelie, Big, Liar, Liar,* etc. etc.) but they're not considered fantasies, and are enjoyed by reviewers and viewers who, if asked, will usually say they don't really care for fantasy.

Why does this bother me?

For two reasons. The general public is missing out on some great material created by authors working in our genre (Tim Powers, James P. Blaylock, Nina Kiriki Hoffman...I could make a list that would be pages long), and those same authors aren't reaping the benefit of a larger audience which would allow them to live a bit better and devote more time to writing. When I think of someone as talented as William Browning Spencer not making a living as a full-time writer, I think it's criminal.

But unfortunately, there's nothing much we can do about it except simply enjoy the best of both worlds ourselves. And perhaps try to convince those friends of ours who don't read fantasy to try a book or two. They might like them. Because fantasy doesn't all have to be wizards and elves and quests. And with that said, a novel with those elements isn't by and of itself a bad thing, either. It all depends on the skill of the writer, and our field has some great ones.

Coraline, by Neil Gaiman, HarperCollins, 2002, $15.99.

Is there anything Gaiman doesn't do well?

Coraline isn't his first foray into children's fiction, but it's certainly his most successful. In fact, it's astonishingly good — an instant classic, if you'll excuse the hyperbole — and one that I can imagine both children and adults reading a hundred years from now with the same enjoyment they do Lewis Carroll's Alice books.

Carroll is actually a good touchstone, since *Coraline* reminds me of nothing so much as a macabre *Alice in Wonderland.* The title character doesn't go through a mirror or fall down a rabbit hole, but she does go through a door that normally opens on a brick wall to find herself in a twisted version of her own world. There she meets her other parents, the ones with buttons for eyes who want only the very best for Coraline, which includes making her one of their own.

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Our plucky heroine escapes, only to find that her real parents have now been kidnapped and taken into that other world. Calling the police doesn't help — they only suggest she's having a nightmare and that she should go wake her mother and have her make a cup of hot chocolate. So it's up to Coraline to rescue not only her real parents, but also the spirits of the dead children that were taken before the "other mother" set her sights on Coraline.

The book is illustrated throughout by Dave McKean's pen and ink drawings that are both charming and strange. The prose is simple and lovely, the subject matter both dark and whimsical (sometimes whimsically dark, other times darkly whimsical—you get the idea). In accompanying material Gaiman writes that it's a story "that children experienced as an adventure, but which gave adults nightmares," and while I didn't get nightmares (I'm too much of a child, I suppose) I can easily see how both hold true. I do know that images from the book pop into my head at surprising times with an accompanying little shiver and thrill, and that I plan to reread it very soon. Now that I know the story, I want to savor the wonderful prose.

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Collectors might be interested in tracking down a signed (by the author) limited edition that HarperCollins has also produced. It features a color frontispiece by the book's illustrator as well as almost twenty pages of extra material that includes some more black and white art as well as commentaries by Gaiman himself. At around twenty-five dollars, it's a good price for a collectible book.

Or you can buy the peanutpress e-book version, which also includes the additional material, at around eleven dollars.

* * *

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A Fistful of Sky, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Ace, 2002, $23.95.

Did you ever get something you wished for, only to discover that it wasn't what you wanted at all? That's what lies at the heart of Nina Kiriki Hoffman's new novel, though, of course, being Hoffman, it's about so much more.

Gypsum LaZelle is the only normal child in a Californian family of magically gifted witchy folk... that is, until she reaches twenty and has a late Transition (when one's powers manifest). Unfortunately, rather than gaining some useful power, her gift is the unkind power of curses. Complicating matters, LaZelles have to use their powers a few times a day, or the power builds up inside them to their own detriment. So not only does Gypsum finally have a power, she also has to use it.

Being a fairly kind-hearted person, she doesn't want to curse anyone or anything. But since she has to use the power, she tries to do the least amount of damage — with predictably awful results, because the curse always manages to find a way to manifest, no matter how carefully Gypsum thinks through her spell. Her family stands by her through her misadventures, assuring her that she'll gain control over her power.

The real question is, will any of them survive long enough to see that happen?

There's magic galore in Hoffman's new novel. Joyous moments when Gypsum can revel in finally having a power. Dark moments when those she loves are imperiled. Hilarious moments at the turns some of the curses take. She also enters into her first relationship and gains an unexpected ally who might prove to be more dangerous than her newfound power.

It's partly a coming-of-age novel, or a coming-into-one's-power one — literally, in this case, but it also serves as an analogy for what lies at the heart of all such stories. It's also about family dynamics and trust and all the messy, sad, and happy things that make up our lives. But mostly it's a great story with delightfully eccentric characters and more of a sense of wonder than you'll find on a whole bookshelf of most other fantasy books being written these day.

Highly recommended.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Lion's Blood, by Steven Barnes, Warner Aspect, 2002, $24.95.

The Mount, by Carol Emshwiller, Small Beer Press, 2002, $16.

THE ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia marked the end of the autumn planting season and the start of the winter season of idleness. It was a time of relaxation and renewal. Many customary restrictions were suspended, distinctions of social class were largely ignored, and traditional roles were ritually reversed. Masters served their slaves at mealtimes in Roman households, and each home elected a *Saturnalicius Princeps* — "Master of the Saturnalia" — who got to order everyone else around for the duration of the festival.

This social inversion was limited, of course — you wouldn't find slaves having their masters whipped — but spending some time in their servants' shoes must have done something to enhance the empathy of masters for their slaves. At least some slave owners must have been influenced by the annual tradition of switching places — perhaps reflecting upon the arbitrary nature of fate and men's relative positions in the world.

We don't have a Saturnalia to turn the world upside down around us once a year. For our periodic taste of social inversion, we have to turn to sf and fantasy, where it has been a recurring theme since the utopian fantasies of the sixteenth century. Inversion has been one of sf's sharpest tools of social criticism, whether it's handled satirically (as in Pierre Boulle's original *Planet of the Apes)* or in deadly earnest (as in Suzy McKee Charnas's Holdfast novels). Sf inversions snap us out of our comfortable assumptions and force us to ponder the deep contingency of our social and cultural patterns.

Steven Barnes's ambitious new

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novel *Lion's Blood* takes the Saturnalian reversal of masters and slaves and makes it stick. He presents an American South settled by black African explorers whose descendants use white slaves to work their plantations. The story centers on Aidan O'Dere, a young Irishman abducted with his mother and sister by Norse slavers. Sold into servitude on the estate of the Wakil Abu Ali Jallaleddin ibn Rashid al Kushi in New Djibouti, Aidan is befriended by Kai, the junior son of the Wakil. As young men Aidan and Kai enjoy a carefree relationship in which the central fact of their unequal status can usually be overlooked. But as they grow older the inequities of their positions forces them apart. Kai struggles to accept the constraints of his adult role, and Aidan chafes under the yoke, seething as his mother dies in bondage and his wife and infant son are taken to serve in another household.

Switching the roles of black and white in the Old South is an audacious and at the same time seemingly obvious idea — so much so that it's strange to realize it hasn't been tackled in quite this way or at such a scale before. Sf has reversed the roles of animals and humans, and women and men, dozens or even hundreds of times, and the annals of alternate history are just about defined by tales in which the historical vanquished become the victors; but issues of race relations have largely been handled — when at all — allegorically, with aliens taking on the role of the oppressed, as in the film and television series *Alien Nation*.

Surprisingly, the most direct sf confrontations with racial issues date back to the 1950s, 1930s, even the 1910s. T. Shirby Hodge's novel *The White Man's Burden* (1915) imagined a utopian civilization thriving in Africa in the year 5000 A.D., while the warlike, backward whites remain confined to North America. In *The Long Way Back*, by Margot Bennett (1954), explorers from an advanced African society travel to a post-holocaust Great Britain, where they find the remnant whites living in caves. But as the civil rights movement heated up on the political stage, explicit treatments of racial subjects became rare in sf (even as non-genre writers took bolder steps). Octavia Butler gave us sf's most direct grappling with American slavery with *Kindred* (1979), wherein a 20th-century black woman is transported to the 19th-century South and becomes a plantation slave, but that was perhaps the only major example

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of the latter half of the 20th century.

There's no space here to investigate the complex cultural dynamics that left the genre unwilling to tackle racial matters during that period, while many other controversial social issues, from environmentalism to feminism, found a welcoming pulpit in sf. But perhaps the subject has waited for the advent of more African-American writers in sf. Feminism wouldn't have become such a strong part of sf in the 1960s and 1970s if more female writers hadn't taken up their pens — and even today the politics of so-called "authenticity" bring criticism upon a male writer who takes up a serious feminist theme. It's hard to imagine a white writer being encouraged to develop a story like Barnes's, and in earlier years there were precious few black sf writers who might have taken it on. Recently, though, we've seen a flowering of African-American talent in the sf world, with the rise of Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due (who is Barnes's wife), Sheree Thomas, Barnes, and others, so *Lion's Blood* may be the first ripple of a coming wave.

Despite the obviousness of the role reversal, the scenario of *Lion's Blood* packs a significant amount of power. Images of the horrors of slavery have become so commonplace since the days of *Roots* that one might expect they've lost some of their provocative potency, but there are subjects whose moral outrageousness permit them to survive nearly any level of familiarity. The Nazi slaughter of the Jews is one such, and the enslavement of blacks in America is another. And so when we see the quiet life of the O'Dere crannog shattered by the attack of the slavers, and watch as families are broken up and spirits crushed, and when we witness the cruelty and filth of the slave ships that make the Atlantic crossing, we cannot help but be moved, though Barnes shows us nothing we didn't already know. Nevertheless, the familiarity of these horrors takes some of the edge off, because Barnes doesn't reinvigorate any of these wrenching moments with anything of his own — it's like he's following a script, and his characters are merely actors in a dramatization. *Lion's Blood* engages our compassion, empathy, pity and anger, but it buys them cheap, and with borrowed coin.

Barnes might well have made *Lion's Blood* into a revenge fantasy, taking the opportunity in a spirit of interracial fury to visit upon whites the miseries endured by blacks. Or

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he might have taken the chance to indulge in a bit of inverse racism, and given us an African-derived civilization more humane and enlightened than the European. But instead — to his credit — he has chosen to champion a doctrine of human universality in which the full range of human nobility and frailty can be found in any group and any culture. Barnes plays his inversion with impeccable fairness, and his willingness to portray his black masters in as cruel a light as their real-world white counterparts lends an extra weight to the mistreatment and dehumanization he depicts.

Unfortunately, what involvement Barnes's novel generates comes from the undeniable emotional force inherent in its premise, not from the characters or their story itself. As a literary experience, *Lion's Blood* is too often bland and clumsy. Barnes tells when he should show, and his descriptions fail to generate vivid images, employing vague gesture or hyperbole in place of concrete detail. The crannog's fishermen return to the village "sharing a jest here, a barbed comment there." Better to let us hear that banter. The Wakil's slave cook "magically" fashions flour into "the world's tastiest confections," but this gives us nothing we can see, smell, or taste. The Wakil's warrior brother, Malik, practices his art with precision, "every motion spontaneous, reflexive and yet calculated for maximum effect." We may understand from this that Malik is an excellent fighter, but we can't *see* it — there's not a single image around which we can begin to envision the scene.

The weakness of description contributes to the most disappointing aspect of *Lion's Blood:* the depiction of the world that results from Barnes's alternate history. Without more tangible detail, we don't get to experience this African America enough — it doesn't come alive as a fully imagined world. And the alternate history, as it's outlined in the text and in Barnes's brief afterword, isn't particularly well conceived. The dominance of Islamic culture seems a peculiar choice. Why not give us a civilization derived from native African roots? After all, Islam is as much a legacy of servitude for blacks as Christianity, brought by Arab slavers, not grown in African soil. And it seems unlikely that Islam and Christianity would even have appeared in Barnes's altered timeline, which has the Roman Empire snuffed in the cradle by Egypt and Carthage. Even if we grant this much parallelism, it's just about impossible to believe that a musi-

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cal genius named Mozart would arise in this vastly changed Europe, or that a painter called da Vinci would sketch something recognizable to us as *The Last Supper*. The Ethiopian city of Addis Ababa was founded in our world in 1892, so how could it become the capital of the African empire in *Lion's Blood*? These might be minor quibbles if *Lion's Blood* offered a wealth of other, more convincing detail, but it doesn't.

What *Lion's Blood* does provide is a welcome opportunity to confront again a despicable chapter in American history, and to view it from a new perspective — which is always useful in helping us prevent familiarity from breeding indifference. Barnes brings to the subject a remarkable generosity of spirit, as he resists the path of anger and retribution to offer instead a broader meditation on the cruelties humans visit upon each other. It would have been so much more meaningful if he could have matched his moral vision with an artistic one of equal caliber.

Carol Emshwiller's new novel tackles similar themes from a somewhat different perspective. *The Mount* puts human beings in the role of horses, bred and kept and ridden by the alien Hoots, who have conquered Earth sometime in the not-too-distant future.

The Hoots are smallish, with large heads, vestigial legs, and powerful hands. They ride on human shoulders like toddlers, unable to support their own weight for long on their weak limbs. Men they call Sams, women Sues. They breed some for size, and others for speed: They race their humans and show the prettier ones, and they admire human strength and grace. Hoot children play with doll humans, and the walls of Hoot homes feature portraits of famous human steeds.

It's a scenario that might sound impossible to keep from descending into absurdity, but — as she has done in other novels and stories such as *Carmen Dog* and "Mrs. Jones" — Emshwiller balances delicately on the beam, carrying the tale straight-faced with a combination of precise language, gentle humor, a near-perfectly pitched voice, and a tenderness toward her characters that draws us in and beguiles us. We're too involved in her story to wonder churlishly if the premise might be too ridiculous.

Like Barnes, Emshwiller centers her story on the relationship between a young master and his equally young servant. The mount of the title is Charley (are we meant to read "Charley Horse"?), called Smiley by the Hoots, who has been

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chosen to host the heir to the Hoot throne known as The-Future-Ruler-of-Us-All. Charley calls him Little Master. They train together and they play together, rider and mount learning each other's ways. Alone in his stall, Charley dreams of whisking his Little Master away from the overseers, whom Charley thinks treat The-Future-Ruler too harshly. When a band of wild humans led by Charley's father overruns the Hoot town, Charley saves his Little Master's life from the mob, and carries him off to the humans' rough village.

Emshwiller delves deeper into the psychology of servitude than Barnes by giving us a central character raised in slavery who accepts it as his natural condition. Charley resents his "rescue" by his father. He misses the comforts of life with the Hoots: "I like our old stalls with hot-and-cold running water and fancy kitchens, heaters you can turn on anytime you want." He has absorbed the viewpoint of the Hoots so thoroughly that even the sight of unmounted humans in the village makes him uncomfortable. "I just can't get used to seeing all of us Sams and Sues walking around with no Hoots on them. They look like half-people." Charley believes in the structure of Hoot society — the freedom offered by his father looks like another, worse sort of servitude, more work and fewer benefits.

Emshwiller gets to the heart of what keeps slaves in their place — what keeps all oppressive hierarchies running, despite what might seem obvious inequities to an outside observer: the dynamic of oppressor and oppressed, the inertia of established culture, the seduction of propaganda. "How can you be even a little bit civilized," Charley wonders rhetorically, "without Sams and Sues keeping at their jobs like they're supposed to?" Resistance means hardship and suffering, the upheaval of the social order, and few even among the downtrodden will choose that path when it's so much easier to stay in a comfortable stall.

As Kim Stanley Robinson observes in his blurb for *The Mount*, we are all mounts — we're all caught up in one way or another in systems like Hoot servitude, kept in our places by fear, or a love of ease, or inertia, or sheer laziness. Emshwiller reminds us of this, shows us how it happens, and how very difficult it can be to escape.

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A few months ago we brought you "Social Dreaming of the Frin," a short piece from Ms. Le Guin's upcoming collection, Changing Planes. *Here is another one from this collection of sociological extrapolations. This story was published last summer in the online magazine* The Infinite Matrix.

The Seasons of the Ansarac

By Ursula K. Le Guin

To the Ospreys of McKenzie Bridge, whose lifestyle inspired this story.

I TALKED FOR A LONG TIME once with an old Ansar. I met him at his Interplanary Hostel, which is on a large island far out in the Great Western Ocean, well away from the migratory routes of the Ansarac. It is the only place visitors from other planes are allowed, these days.

Kergemmeg lived there as a native host and guide, to give visitors a little whiff of local color, for otherwise the place is like a tropical island on any of a hundred planes — sunny, breezy, lazy, beautiful, with feathery trees and golden sands and great, blue-green, white-maned waves breaking on the reef out past the lagoon. Most visitors came to sail, fish, beachcomb, and drink fermented ü, and had no interest otherwise in the plane or in the sole native of it they met. They looked at him, at first, and took photos, of course, for he was a striking figure: about seven feet tall, thin, strong, angular, a little stooped by age, with a narrow head, large, round, black-and-gold eyes, and a beak. There is an all-or-nothing quality about a beak

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that keeps the beaked face from being as expressive as those on which the nose and mouth are separated, but Kergemmeg's eyes and eyebrows revealed his feelings very clearly. Old he might be, but he was a passionate man.

He was a little bored and lonely among the uninterested tourists, and when he found me a willing listener (surely not the first or last, but currently the only one) he took pleasure in telling me about his people, as we sat with a tall glass of iced ü in the long, soft evenings, in a purple darkness all aglow with the light of the stars, the shining of the sea-waves full of luminous creatures, and the pulsing glimmer of clouds of fireflies up in the fronds of the feather-trees.

From time immemorial, he said, the Ansarac had followed a Way. *Madan*, he called it. The way of my people, the way things are done, the way things are, the way to go, the way that is hidden in the word *always:* like ours, his word held all those meanings. "Then we strayed from our Way," he said. "For a little while. Now again we do as we have always done."

People are always telling you that "we have always done thus," and then you find that their "always" means a generation or two, or a century or two, at most a millennium or two. Cultural ways and habits are blips, compared to the ways and habits of the body, of the race. There really is very little that human beings on our plane have "always" done, except find food and drink, sleep, sing, talk, procreate, nurture the children, and probably band together to some extent. Indeed it can be seen as our human essence, how few behavioral imperatives we follow. How flexible we are in finding new things to do, new ways to go. How ingeniously, inventively, desperately we seek the right way, the true way, the Way we believe we lost long ago among the thickets of novelty and opportunity and choice....

The Ansarac had a somewhat different choice to make than we did, perhaps a more limited one. But it has its interest.

Their world is farther from a larger sun than ours, so, though its spin and tilt are much the same as Earth's, its year lasts about twenty-four of our years. And the seasons are correspondingly large and leisurely, each of them six of our years long.

On every plane and in every climate that has a spring, spring is the

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breeding time, when new life is born; and for creatures whose life is only a few seasons or a few years, early spring is mating time, too, when new life begins. So it is for the Ansarac, whose life span is, in their terms, three years.

They inhabit two continents, one on the equator and a little north of it, one that stretches up toward the north pole; the two are joined, as the Americas are, by a narrower mountainous bridge of land, though it is all on a smaller scale. The rest of the world is ocean, with a few archipelagoes and scattered large islands, none with any human population except the one used by the Interplanary Agency.

The year begins, Kergemmeg said, when, in the cities of the plains and deserts of the South, the Year Priests give the word and great crowds gather to see the sun pause at the peak of a Tower or stab through a Target with an arrow of light at dawn: the moment of solstice. Now increasing heat will parch the southern grasslands and prairies of wild grain, and in the long dry season the rivers will run low and the wells of the city will go dry. Spring follows the sun northward, melting snow from those far hills, brightening valleys with green.... And the Ansarac will follow the sun.

"Well, I'm off," old friend says to old friend in the city street. "See you around!" And the young people, the almost-one-year-olds — to us they'd be people of twenty-one or twenty-two — drift away from their households and groups of pals, their colleges and sports clubs, and seek out, among the labyrinthine apartment-complexes and communal dwellings and hostelries of the city, one or the other of the parents from whom they parted, back in the summer. Sauntering casually in, they remark, "Hullo, Dad," or "Hullo, Mother. Seems like everybody's going back north." And the parent, careful not to insult by offering guidance over the long route they came half the young one's life ago, says, "Yes, I've been thinking about it myself. It certainly would be nice to have you with us. Your sister's in the other room, packing."

And so by ones, twos, and threes, the people abandon the city. The exodus is a long process, without any order to it. Some people leave quite soon after the solstice, and others say about them, "What a hurry they're in," or "Shennenne just has to get there first so she can grab the old homesite." But some people linger in the city till it is almost empty, and still can't make up their mind to leave the hot and silent streets, the sad,

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shadeless, deserted squares, that were so full of crowds and music all through the long halfyear. But first and last they all set out on the roads that lead north. And once they go, they go with speed.

Most carry with them only what they can carry in a backpack or load on a ruba (from Kergemmeg's description, rubac are something like small, feathered donkeys). Some of the traders who have become wealthy during the Desert Season start out with whole trains of rubac loaded with goods and treasures. Though most people travel alone or in a small family group, on the more popular roads they follow pretty close after one another. Larger groups form temporarily in places where the going is hard and the older and weaker people need help gathering and carrying food.

There are no children on the road north.

Kergemmeg did not know how many Ansarac there are but guessed some hundreds of thousands, perhaps a million. All of them join the migration.

As they go up into the mountainous Middle Lands, they do not bunch together, but spread out onto hundreds of different tracks, some followed by many, others by only a few, some clearly marked, others so cryptic that only people who have been on them before could ever trace the turnings. "That's when it's good to have a three-year-old along," Kergemmeg said. "Somebody who's been up the way twice." They travel very light and very fast. They live off the land except in the arid heights of the mountains, where, as he said, "They lighten their packs." And up in those passes and high canyons, the hard-driven rubac of the traders' caravans begin to stumble and tremble, perishing of exhaustion and cold. If the trader still tries to drive them on, people on the road unload them and loose them and let their own pack-beast go with them. The little animals limp and scramble back down southward, back to the desert. The goods they carried end up strewn along the wayside for anyone to take; but nobody takes anything, except a little food at need. They don't want stuff to carry, to slow them down. Spring is coming, cool spring, sweet spring, to the valleys of grass and the forests, the lakes, the bright rivers of the North, and they want to be there when it comes.

Listening to Kergemmeg, I imagined that if one could see the migration from above, see those people all threading along a thousand paths and trails, it would be like seeing our Northwest Coast in spring a century or

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two ago when every stream, from the mile-wide Columbia to the tiniest creek, turned red with the salmon run.

The salmon spawn and die when they reach their goal, and some of the Ansarac are going home to die, too: those on their third migration north, the three-year-olds, whom we would see as people of seventy and over. Some of them don't make it all the way. Worn out by privation and hard going, they drop behind. If people pass an old man or woman sitting by the road, they may speak a word or two, help to put up a little shelter, leave a gift of food, but they do not urge the elder to come with them. If the elder is very weak or ill they may wait a night or two, until perhaps another migrant takes their place. If they find an old person dead by the roadside, they bury the body. On its back, with the feet to the north: going home.

There are many, many graves along the roads north, Kergemmeg said. Nobody has ever made a fourth migration.

The younger people, those on their first and second migrations, hurry on, crowded together in the high passes of the mountains, then spreading out ever wider on a myriad narrow paths through the prairies as the Middle Land widens out north of the mountains. By the time they reach the Northland proper, the great rivers of people have tasseled out into thousands of rivulets, veering west and east, across the north.

Coming to a pleasant hill country where the grass is already green and the trees are leafing out, one of the little groups comes to a halt. "Well, here we are," says Mother. "Here it is." There are tears in her eyes and she laughs, the soft, clacking laugh of the Ansarac. "Shuku, do you remember this place?"

And the daughter who was less than a halfyear old when she left this place — eleven or so, in our years — stares around with amazement and incredulity, and laughs, and cries, "But it was *bigger* than this!"

Then perhaps Shuku looks across those half-familiar meadows of her birthplace to the just-visible roof of the nearest neighbor and wonders if Kimimmid and his father, who caught up to them and camped with them for a few nights and then went on ahead, were there already, living there, and if so, would Kimimmid come over to say hello?

For, though the people who lived so close-packed, in such sociable and ceaseless promiscuity in the Cities Under the Sun, sharing rooms, sharing beds, sharing work and play, doing everything together in groups and

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crowds, now have all gone apart, family from family, friend from friend, each to a small and separate house here in the meadowlands, or farther north in the rolling hills, or still farther north in the lakelands — even though they have all scattered out like sand from a broken hourglass, the bonds that unite them have not broken; only changed. Now they come together, not in groups and crowds, not in tens and hundreds and thousands, but by two and two.

"Well, here you are!" says Shuku's mother, as Shuku's father opens the door of the little house at the meadow's edge. "You must have been just a few days ahead of us."

"Welcome home," he says gravely. His eyes shine. The two adults take each other by the hand and slightly raise their narrow, beaked heads in a particular salute, an intimate yet formal greeting. Shuku suddenly remembers seeing them do that when she was a little girl, when they lived here, long ago. Here at the birthplace.

"Kimimmid was asking about you just yesterday," Father says to Shuku, and he softly clacks a laugh.

Spring is coming, spring is upon them. Now they will perform the ceremonies of the spring.

Kimimmid comes across the meadow to visit, and he and Shuku talk together, and walk together in the meadows and down by the stream. Presently, after a day or a week or two, he asks her if she would like to dance. "Oh, I don't know," she says, but seeing him stand tall and straight, his head thrown back a little, in the posture that begins the dance, she too stands up; at first her head is lowered, though she stands straight, arms at her sides; but then she wants to throw her head back, back, to reach her arms out wide, wide...to dance, to dance with him....

And what are Shuku's parents and Kimimmid's parents doing, in the kitchen garden or out in the old orchard, but the same thing? They face each other, they raise their proud and narrow heads, and then he leaps, arms raised above his head, a great leap and a bow, a low bow...and she bows too.... And so it goes, the courtship dance. All over the northern continent, now, the people are dancing.

Nobody interferes with the older couples, recourting, refashioning their marriage. But Kimimmid had better look out. A young man comes across the meadow one evening, a young man Shuku never met before; his

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birthplace is some miles away. He has heard of Shuku's beauty. He sits and talks with her. He tells her that he is building a new house, in a grove of trees, a pretty spot, nearer her home than his. He would like her advice on how to build the house. He would like very much to dance with her some time. Maybe this evening, just for a little, just a step or two, before he goes away?

He is a wonderful dancer. Dancing with him on the grass in the late evening of early spring, Shuku feels that she is flying on a great wind, and she closes her eyes, her hands float out from her sides as if on that wind, and meet his hands....

Her parents will live together in the house by the meadow; they will have no more children, for that time is over for them, but they will make love as often as ever they did when they first were married. Shuku will choose one of her suitors, the new one, in fact. She goes to live with him and make love with him in the house they finish building together. Their building, their dancing, gardening, eating, sleeping, everything they do, turns into making love. And in due course Shuku is pregnant; and in due course she bears two babies. Each is born in a tough, white membrane or shell. Both parents tear this protective covering open with hands and beaks, freeing the tiny curled-up newborn, who lifts its infinitesimal beaklet and peeps blindly, already gaping, greedy for food, for life.

The second baby is smaller, is not greedy, does not thrive. Though Shuku and her husband both feed her with tender care, and Shuku's mother comes to stay and feeds the little one from her own beak and rocks her endlessly when she cries, still she pines and weakens. One morning lying in her grandmother's arms the infant twists and gasps for breath, and then is still. The grandmother weeps bitterly, remembering Shuku's baby brother, who did not live even this long, and tries to comfort Shuku. The baby's father digs a small grave out back of the new house, among the budding trees of the long springtime, and the tears fall and fall from his eyes as he digs. But the other baby, the big girl, Kikirri, chirps and clacks and eats and thrives.

About the time Kikirri is hauling herself upright and shouting "Da!" at her father and "Ma!" at her mother and grandmother and "No!" when told to stop what she is doing, Shuku has another baby. Like many second conceptions, it is a singleton. A fine boy, small, but greedy. He grows fast.

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And he will be the last of Shuku's children. She and her husband will make love still, whenever they please, in all the delight and ease of the time of flowering and the time of fruit, in the warm days and the mild nights, in the cool under the trees and out in the buzzing heat of the meadow in summer noontime, but it will be, as they say, luxury love; nothing will come of it but love itself.

Children are born to the Ansarac only in the early Northern spring, soon after they have returned to their birthplace. Some couples bring up four children, and many three; but often, if the first two thrive, there is no second conception.

"You are spared our curse of overbreeding," I said to Kergemmeg when he had told me all this. And he agreed, when I told him a little about my plane.

But he did not want me to think that an Ansar has no real sexual or reproductive choice at all. Pairbonding is the rule, but human will and contrariness change and bend and break it, and he talked about those exceptions. Many pairbonds are between two men or two women. Such couples and others who are childless are often given a baby by a couple who have three or four, or take on an orphaned child and bring it up. There are people who take no mate and people who take several mates at one time or in sequence. There is of course adultery. And there is rape. It is bad to be a girl among the last migrants coming up from the South, for the sexual drive is already strong in such stragglers, and young women are all too often gang-raped and arrive at their birthplace brutalized, mateless, and pregnant. A man who finds no mate or is dissatisfied with his wife may leave home and go off as a peddler of needles and thread or a tool-sharpener and tinker; such wanderers are welcomed for their goods but mistrusted as to their motives.

When we had talked together through several of those glimmering purple evenings on the verandah in the soft sea breeze, I asked Kergemmeg about his own life. He had followed Madan, the rule, the way, in all respects but one, he said. He mated after his first migration north. His wife bore two children, both from the first conception, a girl and a boy, who of course went south with them in due time. The whole family rejoined for his second migration north, and both children had married close by, so that he knew his five grandchildren well. He and his wife had spent most

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of their third season in the South in different cities; she, a teacher of astronomy, had gone farther south to the Observatory, while he stayed in Terke Keter to study with a group of philosophers. She had died very suddenly of a heart attack. He had attended her funeral. Soon after that he made the trek back north with his son and grandchildren. "I didn't miss her till I came back home," he said, factually. "But to come there to our house, to live there without her — that wasn't something I could do. I happened to hear that someone was needed to greet the strangers on this island. I had been thinking about the best way to die, and this seemed a sort of halfway point. An island in the middle of the ocean, with not another soul of my own people on it...not quite life, not quite death. The idea amused me. So I am here." He was well over three Ansar years old; getting on for eighty in our years, though only the slight stoop of his shoulders and the pure silver of his crest showed his age.

The next night he told me about the southern migration, describing how a man of the Ansarac feels as the warm days of the northern summer begin to wane and shorten. All the work of harvest is done, the grain stored in airtight bins for next year, the slow-growing edible roots planted to winter through and be ready in the spring; the children are shooting up tall, active, increasingly restless and bored by life on the homeplace, more and more inclined to wander off and make friends with the neighbors' children. Life is sweet here, but the same, always the same, and luxury love has lost its urgency. One night, a cloudy night with a chill in the air, your wife in bed next to you sighs and murmurs, "You know? I miss the city." And it comes back to you in a great wave of light and warmth — the crowds, the deep streets and high houses packed with people, the Year Tower high above it all — the sports arenas blazing with sunlight, the squares at night full of lantern-lights and music where you sit at the café tables and drink ü and talk and talk till halfway to morning — the old friends, friends you haven't thought of all this time — and strangers — how long has it been since you saw a new face? How long since you heard a new idea, had a new thought? Time for the city, time to follow the sun!

"Dear," the mother says, "we can't take *all* your rock collection south, just pick out the most special ones," and the child protests, "But I'll *carry* them! I promise!" Forced at last to yield, she finds a special, secret place for her rocks till she comes back, never imagining that by next year,

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when she comes back home, she won't care about her childish rock collection, and scarcely aware that she has begun to think constantly of the great journey and the unknown lands ahead. The city! What do you do in the city? Are there rock collections?

"Yes," Father says. "In the museum. Very fine collections. They'll take you to see all the museums when you're in school."

School?

"You'll love it," Mother says with absolute certainty.

"School is the best good time in the world," says Aunt Kekki. "I loved school so much I think I'm going to teach school, this year."

The migration south is quite a different matter from the migration north. It is not a scattering but a grouping, a gathering. It is not haphazard but orderly, planned by all the families of a region for many days beforehand. They all set off together, five or ten or fifteen families, and camp together at night. They bring plenty of food with them in handcarts and barrows, cooking utensils, fuel for fires in the treeless plains, warm clothing for the mountain passes, and medicines for illness along the way.

There are no old people on the southward migration — nobody over seventy or so in our years. Those who have made three migrations stay behind. They group together in farmsteads or the small towns that have grown around the farmsteads, or they live out the end of their life with their mate, or alone, in the house where they lived the springs and summers of their lives. (I think what Kergemmeg meant, when he said he had followed his people's Way in all ways but one, was that he had not stayed home, but had come to the island.) The "winter parting," as it is called, between the young going south and the old staying home is painful. It is stoical. It is as it must be.

Only those who stay behind will ever see the glory of autumn in the Northern lands, the blue length of dusk, the first faint patterns of ice on the lake. Some have made paintings or left letters describing these things for the children and grandchildren they will not see again. Most die before the long, long darkness and cold of winter. None survive it.

Each migrating group, as they come down toward the Middle Land, is joined by others coming from east and west, till at night the twinkle of campfires covers all the great prairie from horizon to horizon. They sing

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at the campfires, and the quiet singing hovers in the darkness between the little fires and the stars.

They don't hurry on the southward journey. They drift along easily, not far each day, though they keep moving. As they reach the foothills of the mountains the great masses split apart again onto many different paths, thinning out, for it's pleasanter to be few on a trail than to come after great numbers of people and trudge in the dust and litter they leave. Up in the heights and passes where there are only a few ways to go they have to come together again. They make the best of it, with cheerful greetings and offers to share food, fire, shelter. Everyone is kind to the children, the half-year-olds, who find the steep mountain paths hard going and often frightening; they slow their pace for the children.

And one evening when it seems they have been struggling in the mountains forever, they come through a high, stony pass to the outlook — South Face, or the Godsbeak Rocks, or the Tor. There they stand and look out and out and down and down to the golden, sunlit levels of the South, the endless fields of wild grain, and some far, faint, purple smudges — the walls and towers of the Cities Under the Sun.

On the downhill road they go faster, and eat lighter, and the dust of their going is a great cloud behind them.

They come to the cities — there are nine of them; Terke Keter is the largest — standing full of sand and silence and sunlight. They pour in through the gates and doors, they fill the streets, they light the lanterns, they draw water from the brimming wells, they throw their bedding down in empty rooms, they shout from window to window and from roof to roof.

Life in the cities is so different from life in the homesteads that the children can't believe it; they are disturbed and dubious; they disapprove. It is so noisy, they complain. It's hot. There isn't anywhere to be alone, they say. They weep, the first nights, from homesickness. But they go off to school as soon as the schools are organized, and there they meet everybody else their age, all of them disturbed and dubious and disapproving and shy and eager and wild with excitement. Back home, they all learned to read and write and do arithmetic, just as they learned carpentry and farming, taught by their parents; but here are advanced classes, libraries, museums, galleries of art, concerts of music, teachers of art, of literature, of mathematics, of astronomy, of architecture, of philosophy —

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here are sports of all kinds, games, gymnastics, and somewhere in the city every night there is a round dance — above all, here is everybody else in the world, all crowded into these yellow walls, all meeting and talking and working and thinking together in an endless ferment of mind and occupation.

The parents seldom stay together in the cities. Life there is not lived by twos, but in groups. They drift apart, following friends, pursuits, professions, and see each other now and then. The children stay at first with one parent or the other, but after a while they too want to be on their own and go off to live in one of the warrens of young people, the communal houses, the dormitories of the colleges. Young men and women live together, as do grown men and women. Gender is not of much import where there is no sexuality.

For they do everything under the sun in the Cities Under the Sun, except make love.

They love, they hate, they learn, they make, they think hard, work hard, play; they enjoy passionately and suffer desperately, they live a full and human life, and they never give a thought to sex — unless, as Kergemmeg said with a perfect poker face, they are philosophers.

Their achievements, their monuments as a people, are all in the Cities Under the Sun, whose towers and public buildings, as I saw in a book of drawings Kergemmeg showed me, vary from stern purity to fervent magnificence. Their books are written there, their thought and religion took form there over the centuries. Their history, their continuity as a culture, is all there.

Their continuity as living beings is what they see to in the North.

Kergemmeg said that while they are in the South they do not miss their sexuality at all. I had to take him at his word, which was given, hard as it might be for us to imagine, simply as a statement of fact.

And as I try to tell here what he told me, it seems wrong to describe their life in the cities as celibate or chaste: for those words imply a forced or willed resistance to desire. Where there is no desire there is no resistance, no abstinence, but rather what one might call, in a radical sense of the word, innocence. They don't think about sex, they don't miss it, it is a non-problem. Their marital life is an empty memory to them, meaningless. If a couple stays together or meets often in the South it is because they are uncommonly good friends — because they love each

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other. But they love their other friends too. They never live separately from other people. There is little privacy in the great apartment houses of the cities — nobody cares about it. Life there is communal, active, sociable, gregarious, and full of pleasures.

But slowly the days grow warmer; the air dryer; there is a restlessness in the air. The shadows begin to fall differently. And the crowds gather in the streets to hear the Year Priests announce the solstice and watch the sun stop, and pause, and turn south.

People leave the cities, one here, a couple there, a family there...It has begun to stir again, that soft hormonal buzz in the blood, that first vague yearning intimation or memory, the body's knowledge of its kingdom coming.

The young people follow that knowledge blindly, without knowing they know it. The married couples are drawn back together by all their wakened memories, intensely sweet. To go home, to go home and be there together!

All they learned and did all those thousands of days and nights in the cities is left behind them, packed up, put away. Till they come back South again....

"That is why it was easy to turn us aside," Kergemmeg said. "Because our lives in the North and the South are so different that they seem, to you others, incoherent, incomplete. And we cannot connect them rationally. We cannot explain or justify our Madan to those who live only one kind of life. When the Bayderac came to our plane, they told us our Way was mere instinct and that we lived like animals. We were ashamed."

(I later checked Kergemmeg's "Bayderac" in the *Encyclopedia Planaria*, where I found an entry for the Beidr, of the Unon Plane, an aggressive and enterprising people with highly advanced material technologies, who have been in trouble more than once with the Interplanary Agency for interfering on other planes. The tourist guidebook gives them the symbols that mean "of special interest to engineers, computer programmers, and systems analysts.")

Kergemmeg spoke of them with a kind of pain. It changed his voice, tightened it. He had been a child when they arrived — the first visitors, as it happened, from another plane. He had thought about them the rest of his life.

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"They told us we should take control over our lives. We should not live two separate half-lives, but live fully all the time, all the year, as all intelligent beings did. They were a great people, full of knowledge, with high sciences and great ease and luxury of life. To them we truly were little more than animals. They told us and showed us how other people lived on other planes. We saw we were foolish to do without the pleasure of sex for half our life. We saw we were foolish to spend so much time and energy going between South and North on foot, when we could make ships, or roads and cars, or airplanes, and go back and forth a hundred times a year if we liked. We saw we could build cities in the North and make homesteads in the South. Why not? Our Madan was wasteful and irrational, a mere animal impulse controlling us. All we had to do to be free of it was take the medicines the Bayderac gave us. And our children need not take medicines, but could have their being altered by the genetic science of Bayder. Then we could be without rest from sexual desire until we got very old, like the Bayderac. And then a woman would be able to get pregnant at any time before her menopause — in the South, even. And the number of her children would not be limited.... They were eager to give us these medicines. We knew their doctors were wise. As soon as they came to us they had given us treatments for some of our illnesses, that cured people as if by a miracle. They knew so much. We saw them fly about in their airplanes, and envied them, and were ashamed.

"They brought machines for us. We tried to drive the cars they gave us on our narrow, rocky roads. They sent engineers to direct us, and we began to build a huge Highway straight through the Middle Land. We blew up mountains with the explosives the Bayderac gave us so the Highway could run wide and level, south to north and north to south. My father was a workman on the Highway. There were thousands of men working on that road, for a while. Men from the southern homesteads.... Only men. Women were not asked to go and do that work. Bayder women did not do such work. It was not women's work, they told us. Women were to stay home with the children while men did the work."

Kergemmeg sipped his ü thoughtfully and gazed off at the glimmering sea and the star-dusted sky.

"Women went down from the homesteads and talked to the men," he said. "They said to listen to them, not only to the Bayderac.... Perhaps

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women don't feel shame the way men do. Perhaps their shame is different, more a matter of the body than the mind. It seemed they didn't care much for the cars and airplanes and bulldozers, but cared a great deal about the medicines that would change us and the rules about who did which kind of work. After all, with us, the woman bears the child, but both parents feed it, both nurture it. Why should a child be left to the mother only? They asked that. How could a woman alone bring up four children? Or more than four children? It was inhuman. And then, in the cities, why should families stay together? The child doesn't want its parents then, the parents don't want the child, they all have other things to do.... The women talked about this to us men, and with them we tried to talk about it to the Bayderac.

"They said, 'All that will change. You will see. You cannot reason correctly. It is merely an effect of your hormones, your genetic programming, which we will correct. Then you will be free of your irrational and useless behavior patterns.'

"But we answered, 'But will we be free of *your* irrational and useless behavior patterns?'

"Men working on the Highway began throwing down their tools and abandoning the big machines the Bayderac had provided. They said, 'What do we need this Highway for when we have a thousand ways of our own?' And they set off southward on those old paths and trails.

"You see, all this happened — fortunately, I think — near the end of a Northern Season. In the North, where we all live apart, and so much of life is spent in courting and making love and bringing up the children, we were — how shall I put it — more short-sighted, more impressionable, more vulnerable. We had just begun the drawing together, then. When we came to the South, when we were all in the Cities Under the Sun, we could gather, take counsel together, argue and listen to arguments, and consider what was best for us as a people.

"After we had done that, and had talked further with the Bayderac and let them talk to us, we called for a Great Consensus, such as is spoken of in the legends and the ancient records of the Year Towers where history is kept. Every Ansar came to the Year Tower of their city and voted on this choice: Shall we follow the Bayder Way or the Manad? If we followed their Way, they were to stay among us; if we chose our own, they were to go.

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We chose our way." His beak clattered very softly as he laughed. "I was a halfyearling, that season. I cast my vote."

I did not have to ask how he had voted, but I asked if the Bayderac had been willing to go.

"Some of them argued, some of them threatened," he said. "They talked about their wars and their weapons. I am sure they could have destroyed us utterly. But they did not. Maybe they despised us so much they didn't want to bother. Or their wars called them away. By then we had been visited by people from the Interplanary Agency, and most likely it was their doing that the Bayderac left us in peace. Enough of us had been alarmed that we agreed then, in another voting, that we wanted no more visitors. So now the Agency sees to it that they come only to this island. I am not sure we made the right choice, there. Sometimes I think we did, sometimes I wonder. Why are we afraid of other peoples, other Ways? They can't all be like the Bayderac."

"I think you made the right choice," I said. "But I say it against my will. I'd like so much to meet an Ansar woman, to meet your children, to see the Cities Under the Sun! I'd like so much to see your dancing!"

"Oh, well, that you can see," he said, and stood up. Maybe we had had a little more ü than usual, that night.

He stood very tall there in the glimmering darkness on the verandah over the beach. He straightened his shoulders, and his head went back. The crest on his head slowly rose into a stiff plume, silver in the starlight. He lifted his arms above his head. It was the pose of the antique Spanish dancer, fiercely elegant, tense, and masculine. He did not leap, he was after all a man of eighty, but he gave somehow the impression of a leap, then a deep graceful bow. His beak clicked out a quick double rhythm, he stamped twice, and his feet seemed to flicker in a complex set of steps while his upper body remained taut and straight. Then his arms came out in a great embracing gesture, toward me, as I sat almost terrified by the beauty and intensity of his dance.

And then he stopped, and laughed. He was out of breath. He sat down and passed his hand over his forehead and his crest, panting a little. "After all," he said, "it isn't courting season."

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We bring you now a decidedly offbeat story from a writer who has previously demonstrated his knack for adventure stories with tales like "A Democracy of Trolls" and "The Political Officer." Mr. Finlay reports from his Ohio home that he is currently working on several heroic fantasy tales, but for the moment we've got this contemporary tale, an insightful look into the life of a magazine publisher.

A Game of Chicken

By Charles Coleman Finlay

GRAVEL CRUNCHED UNDER the car tires as Ed pulled off the country road beside the big iron gates. A few placid bison grazed on the green slopes behind an electric fence. An old white farmhouse, bright red barn, and drab prefab research buildings rested on the hilltop. The sunset turned the clouds into hues of pink and blue, like cotton candy at the circus.

And there's the freak show, Ed thought as he spied several cat-sized shapes pecking at the grass beside the driveway.

He parked the car, got out, and buzzed the gate, waving into the little camera like an idiot. He never thought of himself as such, but he'd come out here without knowing why he'd been invited. Still, how could he pass it up?

The gate swung open and he decided to walk up the long driveway, just to stretch his legs. And to take a closer look at the famous chickens.

Yes, they certainly were four-legged chickens all right. Amazing and amusing. They strutted awkwardly, as if always falling forward. The front legs looked too short, at least compared to the pictures he'd seen online.

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"Ah! There you are!" cried an enthusiastic voice.

Ed glanced up. A tall, fit, silver-haired man in a polo shirt and khakis lunged toward him, hand outstretched. Ed thrust out his own hand in self-defense, had it gripped, and shaken.

"Walter Griffin," said the man, introducing himself. "Guess you could say I'm the rancher hereabouts."

"Edward Bango. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Griffin."

"Griffey. All my friends call me Griffey." He grinned conspiratorially as he removed a silver card holder from his pocket, and offered Ed his business card.

Ed took it, even though he'd probably misplace it before he could scan it into his rolodex.

Griffin Farm Products
"Growing For The Future"

That's all it said, plus the usual address information. It was made of some fancy brown paper with bits of seed and grass in it, and printed in maroon ink. Looked handmade. Ed shoved it in his pocket. "Thanks. So these are the chickens you invented?"

"Yes!" cried Griffey, still wearing that unexplained grin. "Though invention is too strong a term. We take research from other fields and find commercial applications for it. With the chickens, it was a simple modification to gene Tbx4."

"This came out of some medical research?"

"Correct! Holt-Oram Syndrome. Where other people saw a birth defect, we saw opportunity! Twice as many drumsticks, and easier to care for."

"Well they can't fly the coop, that's for sure!"

The smile on Griffey's face disappeared like ice in a deep fryer. "Actually, that's one of our selling points. We have chicken producers lined up to buy them, if it weren't for the protesters. You think that they'd see us for what we are — a pro-environmental business."

Ed sighed. People thought that just because he published a magazine, he had some kind of arcane power over public opinion. "If you think I can help you with...."

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Griffey waved his hand, and the smile came back again. "No, wouldn't dream of it, Ed. Can I call you Ed? I invited you here to get in on the ground floor of our next venture."

Ed looked out to the fields, where the bison grazed. Maybe they'd invented real buffalo wings. Which would be interesting, although he couldn't imagine eating them. "And that would be?"

"Let me show you. We'll start with the end product, so you can judge the quality, then we'll look at the production process."

Griffey led him past the Norman Rockwell farmhouse to the functional research bunkers inset into the hillside. Even though he knew better, Ed still half-expected to see Frankenstein's laboratory inside. What he saw were stacks of paper, various sizes and colors spread across ordinary work desks. "Is this your design department?" he asked.

"This is our product development lab." Griffey picked up a sheet of paper and handed it to Ed. "What do you think?"

Ed was no judge of paper in anything except bulk, by the roll. This looked like some fancy Japanese stationery, a pale ivory color with hints of grasses in it. "Uh, very nice," he said. What exactly was he supposed to say?

"Where do you think it comes from?" asked Ed, grinning again.

"Some importer from Tokyo?"

"From right here on the farm. We make it from bison excrement. First we — "

"You *what*?"

"We collect the bison excrement, mix it in a vat with some water, some hydrogen peroxide, a few other things, and then pour it out in sheets to dry."

"Why?" Why in God's name, is what he wanted to ask.

"It's the perfect connection between the manufacturing process and nature's own design," enthused Griffey. "To make paper out of the exact same plant fibers, a human would have to gather the grasses, which the bison does by grazing; then pulp them, which the bison does by mastication; then treat them with chemicals, similar in this case to the stomach acids; then roll them into sheets, which the bison does by extruding — "

"I beg your pardon."

"By extruding," stumbled Griffey, thrown off his rhythm. "It's a technical term meaning — "

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"Oh, I know what it means," interrupted Ed. He'd just never heard it as a synonym for crapping. "Please go on."

"Yes. Well then. The paper must be dried, which we do by exposing it to the sun. Some Swedish inventors developed the process using elk dung, for specialty papers, but we think we can mass produce it. We chose the bison for symbolic reasons. The American frontier, pioneer spirit, taking risks. All that."

"All that," Ed repeated. Just to see if it sounded more reasonable coming out of his own mouth.

"In a way, it's very similar to the pharmaceutical industry — goats producing drugs in their milk. Or our chickens. But we expect much less opposition to this product because there are no genetic manipulations involved. The potential return on investment, once this is done in a broad scale, is quite profound."

"Profound." Ed was too stunned to add more. "Quite."

"Although," said Griffey, lowering his voice, "we do have some ideas for three to five years down the road, once the public becomes better educated and more accepting. We think selective genetic modifications could significantly enhance efficiencies."

Ed had a sudden horrific image of genetically enhanced rectums, different sizes for different products —bison crapping out magazines, cows pooping paperbacks. Elephants for newspapers. Sheep for business cards.

He remembered the card in his pocket and resisted the urge to yank it out and fling it to the ground. "Very interesting."

"Come on out to the barn with me," said Griffey. He was Mister Smugness now. "You'll love *this*. Just keep in mind that we're in the prototype stage of research."

Inside the barn, there were tiers of cages containing more of the chickens, all clucking and pecking at their wire prisons. There was something wrong with them. Or rather, more wrong. When Ed looked closely, he saw deformed front legs, stunted wings, limbs that were neither. The bottoms of the cages were filled with a horrible, bloody-colored paste. His stomach churned.

"What you see," Griffey proclaimed, spreading his arms like a prophet, "is recycling in action. These are some of our failed experiments, useless for breeding purposes. So we've put them to another use."

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"Oh, that ought to appease the animal rights folks," said Ed. But he found it hard to introduce the right tone of sarcasm while holding his breath.

"Our thinking exactly! You know that birds have very primitive kidneys compared to mammals?"

"I had no idea."

"Yes. To help stem fluid loss, they absorb most of the moisture from their urine through the cloaca. Reptiles are the same. Look at this."

Ed didn't really want to, but it was too late to stop the enthusiastic inventor from undoing a bracket on the bottom of one of the wire cages. The chicken flapped its stunted, thumb-like limbs and snapped its beak at him.

"Just let me remove the stencil," Griffey said, "and here we go!" He proudly held up a sheet of business cards, exactly like the one in Ed's pocket. "We can concentrate the urine until it's as thick as some inks. In this case, we've supplemented their diet with beets, which is a perfect

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natural dye. Environmentally friendly. We're doing some experiments with indigo as well."

"Fascinating!" The whole concept boggled Ed. "And you invited me here because you want me to write a column on this for my magazine?"

"Not at all," said Griffey, as if astonished that Ed would think so small. "We want you to publish a special issue using our paper, our inks!"

The laugh leaped out of Ed's lips like a chicken taking flight. A four-legged chicken. "What?"

"Yes! It's perfect. Your audience is science fiction readers, who are much more open-minded than the general public. It's the perfect connection between our product and its natural market! It'll promote our product, and bring extra attention to your magazine, even help your sales. It benefits both of us."

Ed could see it now — *The Magazine of Chickenshit Science Fiction.* "What's your price per roll then?"

"We'll have to work out the details on that. We need a firm commitment up front to raise more venture capital. Obviously, the price will go down once we can mass produce."

Yeah, thought Ed. He might as well save himself the time, print the magazine on dollar bills, and give it away.

"So what do you think? Perfect, isn't it?"

"Well," Ed started slowly, "at least when the readers write in to say the magazine stinks, there'll be no reason for the writers to take it personally — they'll just be talking about the paper."

Indignation twitched across Griffey's face. "There is absolutely no odor at all to our product. Except for a slightly pleasant, grassy smell." He ripped off a corner of the sheet in his hand, and shoved it into his mouth. "Once we're done treating it, it's just like any other paper, and perfectly safe for human consumption," he said between chews. He thrust it out at Ed, daring him to take a bite.

"You know," said Ed, recalling a line from a favorite e. e. cummings poem, "there is some shit I will not eat."

He walked out of the barn before Griffey could swallow his pride. Or his paper. The four-legged chickens chased Ed all the way back to his car, like a little pack of feathered terriers.

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Sheila Finch says the novel expansion of her story "Reading the Bones" is due out later this year, as is a new novel, Birds. *The last story she contributed to our pages, "Miles to Go" (June 2002) concerned a top-rank wheelchair athlete who faced a difficult decision when the prospect of healing his legs became possible. Her new story also focuses on a first-rate performer—a dancer in this instance—and how difficult it can be to stand out in one's chosen field.*

Reach

By Sheila Finch

THE FIRST THING HE NOTICES when he's finished dying is that the man and woman who've appeared by the bed are over seven feet tall. They don't look like any doctors he's ever seen.

"Welcome, Mr. Thayer," the woman says.

The room is sterile, white, anonymous. He finds it hard to think coherently. He picks something to concentrate on. The woman's skin and hair shine molten gold.

He shakes away the lingering fog in his head. "Where am I?"

"South California."

"No. I mean — "

He remembers now that his car went off the interstate overpass in a freak storm. He would expect a morgue, but these two don't look like morticians. The woman's blue tunic hugs her body in a designer version of static cling. Not angels either. He finds that reassuring.

She lays a hand on his brow. "You must expect some cognitive dissonance, Mr. Thayer. Try moving your legs."

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He doesn't feel her hand.

Terror that he might not be dead but paralyzed grips him, and he's afraid to find out. "*When Cole Thayer dances* — " a reporter once gushed in a small-town paper, "*he's ten feet tall!*" It's hype, not a view shared by the ranking critics of the dance world, but he can't imagine never dancing again.

The tall visitors wait. He takes a deep breath. He might as well find out right now. He closes his eyes, flexes his toes, raises each leg an inch or two. They move without pain. He opens his eyes and glances down. They're intact. They're also obviously not the legs he used to have. His hands start trembling.

"You have a friend from your own time waiting for you," the man says. He wears some kind of metallic skinsuit that sparks as he moves. "This is her house."

South California. A friend from his own time. "Okay — *When* am I?"

The woman smiles at the man. "I would say the brain came through admirably, wouldn't you?"

"What you'd consider the near future," the man explains. "Your friend, Eileen Lambert, arranged for your neurosuspension."

"Charles won't agree to a divorce," Eileen said. "It's against his religion."

They were sitting on the bluffs in her Lamborghini, watching a summer sunset wash over Catalina Island. Middle-aged, she'd never seemed more desirable to him than now when it appeared he couldn't have her. She had eyes such a dark blue they were almost violet. He wanted to run his fingers over the familiar lines of her full breasts, bury his nose in dark hair already turning silver. Memories of her were imprinted all over his skin. Even if his brain suffered from amnesia, he thought, his body would instantly recognize hers.

"Charles doesn't love you like I do," he argued. "Come away with me. Together we could find heaven on earth."

"We're both too old to find poverty romantic." She leaned over to kiss him, taking the sting out of the words.

He pulled back. Her wealth — or rather, Charles's — had a nasty habit of intruding into their most intimate conversations.

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"You can't expect to dance forever," she said.

And there was the heart of his discontent. No matter how he drove himself, his body never reached the goal he set. Dance classes at the Y had been a skinny kid's ticket off the streets of Los Angeles. He'd worked harder and longer than any dancer he knew — still did — and now time was running out. Dancing was a young person's game. Even so, he might've been satisfied with his mediocre success if he hadn't met Eileen.

"I begin to wonder what you see in me, Eileen?"

"A dreamer," she replied. "A prince in exile."

"And what does that make you?"

"You need a fairy godmother."

Money again. Charles controlled the purse strings, but Eileen had enough to buy herself a real celebrity if she wanted one. In the cool offshore breeze, he felt sudden anger at the realization she must recognize him as second-rate. He wanted to impress her, not accept her charity.

It was the last time he saw her before his accident.

"Neurosuspension," he says now. "That means — "

"You wrecked your original body beyond the primitive repair techniques of last century," the man says. "Ms. Lambert had your head preserved."

A wave of nausea takes him. "I never arranged for that — "

The man waves this objection away. "Surely you'd heard of nanotechnology in your day? We simply grew you a new body."

"Do you like it?" the woman asks.

He swallows, glances down at the gloriously youthful legs and is suddenly dizzy. "How old am I now?"

The woman studies him for a moment. "How old would you think?"

He squints at firm, tanned muscles. "Twenty-five?"

"About right."

Concentrate! he tells himself. Think this incredible situation through. He's survived a terrible wreck. He has a new and improved body. This is apparently the future. Eileen's still alive. And he's going to see her again.

A longing to hold her sweeps over him. He remembers Eileen the day they took Charles's yacht out by Catalina Island, laughing at the comparison they made with the suntanned kids in bikinis on the beach. "*I'm too*

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fat and you're too skinny," she said. *"Better models for Geritol than Armani!"* He remembers her skin smelled like the sea.

"You won't need us anymore," the tall woman says now.

His visitors wink out like a TV program turned off.

He sits up carefully in the empty room — no pain, though his mind keeps insisting there ought to be after an accident like that — then swings his legs over the edge of the bed and stands carefully.

He needs a mirror.

One takes shape in front of him. It takes an act of faith to accept that he's looking at himself. He studies his naked image. He's gained at least eight inches in height and has been lifting weights, judging by the muscular arms folded over his chest, the strong, well-shaped legs.

It's a great body. No, a *fantastic* body. The body he'd always wished for that would draw the huge crowds, maybe bring a movie contract. He grins at his reflection. And as well-equipped as if the doctors knew his secret adolescent fantasies. He can't believe his luck.

He flexes his arms and strikes a pose. Twenty-five, perhaps. But this body's twenty-five as imagined by Hollywood. The face is the original; yet he sees they've fixed that too, smoothing out the wrinkles and removing gray hairs. Perfect.

"Do you like what you see?"

The mirror vanishes. In its place he sees a slender young woman with long golden hair, draped in iridescent silk. At her throat she wears a string of amethysts that match the color of her eyes. For a moment he thinks this one really is an angel.

The cheekbones are higher, nose smaller, skin firmer, lips fuller. But violet eyes —

It can't be.

"Eileen?"

She laughs and comes toward him, hands outstretched. "I knew you'd recognize me."

He touches her stranger's hands hesitantly. They're real.

"Do you approve?" She turns slowly, a rainbow swirling about her slender legs.

"Stunning." That's true, but the truth slashes through his memory of his middle-aged lover.

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She sits down on the bed and studies him. "I haven't seen you upright until now. You look absolutely wonderful!"

"So do you."

This will take some getting used to. He didn't know her when she was in her twenties, yet he knows she can't have looked like this. His memory of the old Eileen seems to be jostling with the reality of this new Eileen, and the discontinuity is jarring. A hundred things he wants to say to her stream through his mind, but he can't get any of them out.

"Are you angry with me?" She takes his hands in hers. "When I saw you in ER after the accident, I couldn't bear the thought of never seeing you again. I took the only way possible."

"So you paid to have my head frozen. It must've been expensive."

This comes out sharper than he intends. She seems not to notice, or perhaps she chooses to ignore it. She's always been more level-headed than he.

"Then I made arrangements to follow you," she says.

"Follow?"

"Years later, of course. And it took a little longer to grow you a whole new body than to fix my old one," she explains. "But you don't want to hear the boring details! You see, I wanted the very best for you, and luckily, I can afford it. That software company Charles founded? It makes Virtual Experiences now. You'd never believe how popular they are."

He feels as if he's making smalltalk with an alien. "And what happened to good old Charles? Is he here too?"

Eileen says coolly, "Charles didn't want to jeopardize his immortal soul."

She glances away, and a window forms in one white wall. He sees a long emerald lawn sloping down to a cliff, cobalt water beyond with a glimpse of an island. He recognizes Catalina.

"You had dreams once, Cole. Perhaps now — " She gazes at him for a moment. "Oh, talking won't work! Come here."

She pulls him down on the bed. Her tongue slides deep into his mouth. The fingers of her left hand twine themselves in his hair; the right hand massages his neck, his shoulder, his chest and finally reaches between his legs. These are actions his brain remembers from a thousand occasions with her.

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He's having sex with a stranger. His fingers don't know the contours of the body they trace. He doesn't even know his own fingers. And his nose doesn't recognize her smell.

His flawless body responds, of course, but he can't work up any passion. She's Eileen, he tells himself, his lover, his best friend. Even if she isn't, what man wouldn't want to get an angel in bed?

"You're just a little rusty," she murmurs. "It'll all come back."

They made his new body too perfect not to perform. But it's all physical release, no emotion in it. He's emptied but not refilled. He feels exhausted, but he notes that's the mind's response, not this fabulous new body's. The body isn't even sweaty. The duality is dizzying, as if he's an imposter inside his own skin.

After a while, she gets up.

He wonders if she notices that something's missing.

"Eileen — " he begins.

She puts a finger on his lips. "I've given you your heart's desire. You have the consummate body you always wanted. You have a second chance."

A SECOND CHANCE TO be a star.

The mirrors of the dance studio in her house on the cliff work like the one he used that first day, appearing when he needs them. He warms up with his reflection — *plié, battement* — extends his arms, *port de bras*. It's a pleasure watching this young body move. He doesn't understand how the doctors did it, but he guesses it cost a fortune. This marvelous studio, like this breathtaking body, is a gift of faith in his talent.

She comes to watch, standing silently by an unmirrored wall. In their old life, he remembers, she always attended his performances, clapping louder than anybody. He thinks of how she filled his dressing-room with flowers for every performance, champagne after every opening as if he were Nureyev or perhaps Michael Flatley.

Jeté!

"Bravo," she says and slips away.

He doesn't see much of her after this, but he knows how busy she must be running the company that's hers now. It amuses him to think that

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Charles never suspected how much business ability she had. It sobers him to know he didn't suspect it either.

The studio appears to be empty space, but he understands just enough of how things operate here to know it's loaded with toys and he's learning to use them already. She's given a poor kid the key to F.A.O. Schwarz.

He owes her so much.

The thought of being in anyone's debt to this extent — even Eileen's — depresses him.

It takes only a few days for this body to learn the movements his brain remembers, yet he's astonished to find there's no sense of strain, no muscular aches or twinges to be massaged out after rehearsal as he would expect. He's astounded at how fast it all comes back to him, better than ever. He catches himself waiting for a slip or a stumble, to be expected, after all. But they never happen. This body has no bad habits to unlearn.

He always wanted to be acclaimed the best in the world, but in the past his body let him down. Now he has a chance of achieving that goal. He feels again, for just a moment, that skinny kid's hunger.

It seems too easy.

After a week of steady practice, something in the air of the empty studio senses his readiness. Lights dim. Walls recede. He feels himself caressed by unseen hands, his torso and limbs draped in a diaphanous second skin. Something prickles over his scalp. When it's done, he's clothed in a kind of silky, weightless armor, a net of sensors her company has developed.

He chooses a solo from *The Firebird*, Koshchei, because that was the role he was performing when he first met her.

Spotlights brighten, music swells. Stravinsky's haunting genius pulls him. His veins flood with the savage blood tide of timpani and brass. He lifts an arm and woodwinds thrill down his nerves to his fingertips. He pirouettes, his feet capturing the jagged peaks, flashing with strings and horns. Sound becomes color to him, an asymmetrical, riotous composition of vermilion slashed with white hot gold. He is on fire with the music.

A thought overtakes him at the top of a *tour en l'air:* A century later and he's finally making truth out of the reporter's exaggeration! Then the flames swallow him up again and there's no Cole Thayer left to think.

Afterward, he wraps himself in a robe that's appeared, and notices a

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thin stream of sparkling text scrolling across the air in front of him. A news report of some kind. No, a ratings system. Olympic scoring performed by a string of electronic fireflies. The lights inform him that his performance rates an eight on a scale of ten.

At first he's irritated that art should be treated like a sporting event. Then he laughs. He vows to become a perfect ten for her sake.

They have fabulous experiences in bed. There are no positions his wonderful new body can't adopt, no tricks this new Eileen doesn't know, and never a time when either of them is too tired or claims a headache. There's also no sense of being on fire with passion. He feels like an actor in a porno movie, performing without fault, but she doesn't seem to notice.

He wonders if perhaps she's a better actor than he is.

She takes him sightseeing, swooping over South California landscapes he strains to remember. Lush meadows, sparkling rivers, spun glass cities, surely he ought to recognize them? But even geography has been perfected, bumps and snags smoothed out, the ugly and the inconvenient banished, and it's all different. Flawless. There's no aggression here, no violence, no strife, no unmet yearning. No tension.

It makes him uneasy.

He wonders what's new in the world of dance. Art can't be tamed. What new forms have arisen, what artistic heights have been scaled? She insists he take a vacation to find out. She's too busy to go with him; the company demands her attention. He has a moment's suspicion she's glad to see him go.

He's happy to learn that none of the pessimistic predictions of his day have come true. Life is filled with marvels, none more wonderful than the young goddesses with sculpted bodies who play with him everywhere he goes. But it's too easy; he misses the thrill of a chase he almost always used to lose.

The dance world brims with competent Pavlova and Nijinsky lookalikes. They're all very good, and he does discover a few original artists flickering like tiny candles. But he finds no shooting stars erupting, no genius hungry to set the world aflame. They in turn seem to find him a novelty, someone who remembers when art didn't come easy.

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After a while, he returns to Eileen. He tries to recapture the past the next time they're in bed. They make love on silk pillows by candlelight, an old favorite that eased creaky joints when they were both middle-aged. His new young body's moving smoothly, but his mind can't get rid of the young goddesses. They are all as lovely as Eileen. Does he need her anymore?

Does she need him? He wonders suddenly what she did here in the years before his new body was ready.

He puts these treacherous thoughts out of his mind and concentrates. They both reach perfect, effortless climax at the same time. What else could he ask for?

Afterward, he's empty again. He sits up, pours wine from the waiting crystal decanter and avoids her eyes. The candles vanish. The chardonnay's chill aquamarine slides down his throat, and he gazes out the window that appears in the wall. Oceanward he sees huge stars sparking against an indigo sky like a painting by van Gogh. He feels as if he's lost something precious.

He makes another attempt to reach back and find her. "Remember how we used to make love on the beach on Catalina Island at sunset?"

"How could I forget?"

"Afterward, we'd read poetry together."

"So long ago," she says.

He feels heartened; she always understands him better than he understands himself. "We made it then. We'll make it now."

"Of course we will," she says. "We make a great team."

For a second, he's suspicious. What does she want from him? Aching silence stretches between them.

She stands up, arms clasped across her breasts. She raises one hand to the window wall and the stars wink out. The surf falls silent. On the now-blank wall, crushed opal light cascades. In her world, he's learned, scenery obeys the whims of the beholder, beautiful illusion.

Tonight he thinks of that as a metaphor for himself.

She's developed Charles's old software company into a successful entertainment business; she told him that the first day in his new studio. He's seen for himself that people don't struggle to excel in sport or the arts

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anymore. Instead they buy virtual experiences of somebody else's greatness. It gives him an idea.

Rehearsing and recording in his studio, he spends some of the best months of his life. There seems to be no end to the wondrous achievements of this super body. He's gained mastery of whatever style he pursues, ballet, jazz, tap, modern, ethnic. There wasn't a dancer alive when he was middle-aged who could outperform him now. The VEs he makes of himself in every role he's ever performed become wildly popular. Her company is inundated with demand for his work, the time traveler from an imperfect past.

Dancing provides an excuse to avoid the problem of intimacy with Eileen. And she doesn't have the time to spare that she once had. Sometimes he wonders if that's the answer to his question of what she saw in him.

He makes more money for himself than he ever wanted.

He makes more money for her than she needs.

The electronic insects that crawl up the air in his studio after every session agree he's very good. It's all so easy, yet he's plagued by a sense of something missing.

One night, after he's recorded for her company all the styles and roles he's ever danced or wanted to dance, mind exhausted but body still glowing, he puts on the delicate spidery headset his own fans use to experience him. He wants to measure his performance against those few he considers his competition. He wants to be sure. On command, the magical studio produces VEs of the best dancers in the world.

It's unsettling at first, this raw experience of another dancer. Not to watch, to *feel* the ripple of someone else's muscles as if they're his own, the feet moving under him, his but not his. It's more than enjoying another's style; it's the sensation of becoming the other, and yet at the same time remaining himself. Art without effort.

He tries on dancers until very late that night.

Until that moment, he's felt the rub of doubt. Now he knows. None of them can compare with him. Realizing the truth knocks breath out of his lungs. The poor kid who never quite made it is finally the superstar.

A ten.

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He's reached the top.

There's nowhere else to go.

HE NEEDS TIME to think about what's happening to him. The "exiled prince" she once called him has claimed his kingdom. Everything he ever yearned for is in his grasp. All his dreams have been fulfilled.

Rain gusts over the terrace of Eileen's luminous house on the cliff. Lilacs she planted to echo her eyes bend low over wet paths, scenting the air. He walks outside in tattered moonlight that sparks diamonds on blossoms and leaves. Even bad weather is beautifully done here. Rain falls clear as crystal. No mud. No melancholy, ambiguous fog.

There's an abyss at the center of his being, a sterile void. He feels its darkness tonight. If he were religious, like Charles, he might think he'd defied death only to lose his soul. But in a world where art is scored like a popularity contest, no one else seems to have noticed this lack in him.

The obvious thorn in paradise is his missing passion for Eileen. Love sustained him in the past, shaped his ambition. And she loved him too — or maybe, he thinks now, she didn't. He doesn't love Eileen any more. She doesn't love him. That's the loss that's bankrupting his art.

But it's not Eileen's fault. He doesn't want to hurt her; she doesn't deserve that. Tonight he'll lay his triumph at her feet, his gift to her. Then....

He doesn't know how he'll find words to tell her what he's thinking of doing then.

In their old lifetime, she brought champagne and they celebrated alone. Now, she gives huge parties. When he comes in from the terrace, he finds the magical house filled once again with the important, the glittering, the famous, and the simply incredibly rich. For a moment he wonders which of them kept her entertained before his body was ready.

It doesn't matter anymore.

Phantom nightingales sing Mozart in phantom jacaranda trees. The first time he heard them he was enchanted. Now he's sick of all her elegant illusions. Pushing his way through the swarm of guests fluttering like moths about her, he enters his studio.

Sensing his attention, a window appears, and he stares out at the

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island in the dark sea. They haven't been to Catalina once since he's been here. Tonight he knows the island's a mirage.

He flings himself on a couch and broods about his situation. He's brilliant at performing every role that any choreographer ever invented. But it doesn't seem enough. He has all he needs or ever yearned for, and there's nothing left to want. He feels like a kid who just opened the last birthday package — everything he asked for, but the right gift's still missing.

She hardly ever comes to his studio now to watch him perform, and when she speaks to him afterward, it's to give him the latest figures from her accountants. She's a businesswoman who makes business decisions. Sometimes he notes a subtle hint of frustration in her voice, as if he's missing the point.

It makes his determination to leave her seem less like betrayal.

"I used to think we could buy heaven."

He looks up to see her, somber tonight in an old-fashioned cut of black velvet, no jewels at her wrists or throat to rival the violet eyes. Tiredness washes over him, not an exhaustion of this body — he doubts it would ever feel tired — but of the heart. To hell with it! He's tried, she can't say he hasn't.

"Everything I've achieved is to repay you, Eileen. What more do you want?"

"More?" she exclaims. "Do you understand so little that you think I want more?"

He's bitter now and needs to punish her for the shadows inside. "You must admit you knew you couldn't lose. There'd be novelty value to my resurrected career if nothing else."

Her head jerks up as if he's slapped her. Color glows on her cheekbones. "I hoped you'd find happiness, Cole. I hoped I'd find happiness. Apparently I misjudged us both."

Some of the old feelings stir. Or perhaps it's just his guilty conscience. He stands up, reaches for her hands. "I've always loved you."

She pulls away.

"The old you used to need the old me. But we're different people now." Then she laughs without humor. "For once, the cliché is truly fresh!"

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Because he did once love her, and perhaps still does, he starts to protest. "Give it time. We can't expect — "

"I've tried," she says. "It's not working."

She's taken his thoughts, the words he didn't want to say, and left him with no more evasions.

"It's serious, isn't it?" he says.

"It's over."

He remembers how he once drove himself to reach what he read in her eyes. He loved her for believing in him then.

He says heavily, "So what happens next?"

She tilts her head up at that. "I think you should leave. Go away. Before I change my mind."

But that's the last thing he wants to do now. He suddenly wants very much to prove she's wrong. Yet isn't this just what he's been thinking about? The prospect of leaving her is terrifying, painful, but strangely exciting too.

"It almost worked, Eileen. We almost found heaven."

"Almost."

He sees a trace of the old Eileen in her eyes, a touch of the sorrow that haunted their experience together, gave it meaning and drove ambitions that were always just out of grasp. In that look he sees all that he's just learned to value, all that he's lost. Pain descends like a gray fog over his heart.

And then an odd thing happens. Fireworks explode in the void inside, lighting his darkness with a new dream. His feet are aflame with an urgent need to give shape to this pain. He sees the path unfolding before him through the mist. It will take a lifetime to reach this goal and he may never get there. His own work — not someone else's — his masterpiece of paradise lost.

He looks at her. Does she know him that well?

Does she love him that much?

"You see, I forgot something," she says softly, turning as the opal cloud of the wall dissolves before her. "The poet was right. For an artist, heaven should stay out of reach."

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Since the early 1950s, Arthur Porges has excelled at the short-short story. Among his most memorable tales are "The Ruum," "$1.98," and "The Rats." Now he shows off his dexterity with four tales in the space of two pages. Don't be surprised to see more of Mr. Porges's mini-fantasies popping up in our pages in months to come.

A Quartet of Mini-Fantasies

By Arthur Porges

One

THERE WAS NOTHING whatever jolly about this dwarfish Santa. He neither spoke nor laughed, but showed a faint sneer as he repeatedly pointed to the big placard hung about his neck. In large black letters it read:

PLEASE HELP!

DEADLY ANTHRAX!

Curious, I moved closer to see who sponsored such a graceless oddball, and wondering, too, about the grayish powder, presumably raw sugar, he sprinkled on each cookie he was handing out to those who put money in his cup. Then my stomach contracted like a clenched fist. Between the two giant phrases, in very tiny print, was one more word: SPREAD.

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Two

There are very few Shadowsmiths left. Theirs is an arcane craft, the mastery of our only two-dimensional entity, soundless, weightless, intangible, eerily supple, capricious, and willful, able to bend smoothly over a curb, or scale a high wall. Cast by Sun, Moon, oil-lamp, candle, or lightbulb on black loam, blue water, purple snow, or yellow sand, fixed, or capering wildly, each shadow is unique.

With his long, prehensile fingers, oddly adhesive at their tips, a Master Shadowsmith, by tugging cunningly at its edges, will make you an elegant new shadow, your very own Dark Other.

Three

I never wanted to become a vampire. Born in this town long plagued by the vile aberrations, I put garlic everywhere, and always wore a cross. That kept me safe for years, but last night He materialized in my bedroom, and when I thrust out the crucifix, the handsome devil said pleasantly, "That has no power over me, young lady. In life I was Rabbi Israel Horowitz." Too late I realized my fatal mistake, and am now one of the undead. I should have used pork-links instead of garlic, and worn a Star of David!

Four

I was greatly intrigued by Harry's wife right from the start. An odd match. She was pretty, elegant, but somehow different, with opalescent eyes that never seemed to blink. And she was too young for my portly business partner, who was pushing fifty. Her strange watchfulness was almost reptilian, suggesting a lizard in the sun waiting for an unwary insect.

This morning his car broke down, so I came to pick him up, and as I poured some coffee at the mirrored sideboard, I saw something in the glass which they didn't realize I'd seen, what with my back to them. A squirt of grapefruit juice had struck her left eye, and amazed I saw her tongue slide out of her red lips to wipe the eyeball clean.

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Jack O'Connell's first story for us, "Legerdemain" (Oct/Nov. 2001) was a memorable tale about a train passenger who receives an odd book. His latest story is a disquieting look at two thieves in the fictional city of Quinsigamond.

The Swag from Doc Hawthorne's

By Jack O'Connell

YUK TANG LIKES TO THINK of himself as Darcey's partner. Darcey would choke if he knew this. He works with Yuk Tang because everyone else he knows has moved west or south. And because Yuk Tang is connected with more than one guy in Little Asia who can move anything — TVs and jewelry right down to paintings and rare stamps and precious metals — in less than a week. And because Yuk Tang agrees to a sixty-forty split, with Darcey hugging the sixty end.

Though Darcey dislikes Yuk Tang on instinct, he admitted to himself last week, while sober and bored, that they work well together. They work the way he dreams about, like they had one smart brain and six fast hands. Yuk Tang has this innate talent for smelling dogs. He can take one whiff, any room of any house, halfway in the window, and give the thumbs down. Darcey has never known Yuk Tang to be careless or unpredictable. He'd walk away from an open jewelry box without flinching if the fifteen-minute buzzer on his watch went off.

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For his part, Darcey thinks of himself as smart and in control. And it's *his* friends who know whether someone's enjoying a week in the Bahamas or just doing three hours at a funeral. Darcey's generous with these friends. He gives them money and as much time as he can spare. There's the guy whose sister is a groomer at a ridiculously expensive kennel. There's the kid who works for the award-winning landscaper. And there's Scalley, a new electrician for a hot local burglar and fire alarm company.

Darcey pays close attention to these people. He studies them the way he'd study a hotel poker game. He knows, without exception, what it is they respond to, what it takes to cement their trust in his friendship. He bought himself a pager so he can return their calls immediately. He knows their favorite restaurants and reserves good tables monthly. He takes them to terrible movies and manages to discuss the films afterward over coffee. He spent a serious chunk of money recently on Scalley's dental restoration.

All of this has paid off like you read about. Without getting sloppy or greedy, Yuk Tang and Darcey have put away a barrel of money. Yuk Tang has shipped a wad to less fortunate family members back in the homeland. Darcey has filled more than one closet suitcase with respectable dollars. It's a happy time. They're not logging a lot of hours and they're rarely losing any sleep. And most importantly, the worry is minimal. Their timing, their attention to detail and planning, has meant few close calls and no sudden trips out of town.

Darcey would hate to have to leave Quinsigamond again. He's done it in the past and it breaks his heart. Even when the trip has been to Miami or Bermuda. He's spent hours on clean beaches, ninety degrees and a breeze, dreaming about the coffee and the smell of the meatloaf at The Miss Q Diner. What he'd really like to do, and what he keeps hidden from everyone, is let some time pass and then launch into a legitimate business. A bar or, more exactly, a club. Something with style and subtlety, where people dress up and it never gets too loud. Sometimes, while on the phone with Scalley, Darcey doodles pictures of the club. Ceiling fans. A long bar. An office for himself, in an upstairs loft, with a one-way mirror for a wall.

Yuk Tang has some of his own plans that he keeps to himself. They're vague, but they also involve the entrepreneurial arts. He's thought about opening a restaurant. Or maybe a video-rental franchise that specializes

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in martial arts films. What he'd like most is an import clothing store. Women's satin dresses and silk scarves. The mark-up could be tremendous. Because of relations in need, he hasn't managed to pile up as much ready cash as Darcey. And though he doesn't resent this, he is unhappy with the sixty-forty split. But his options are limited and he knows he'd have a hell of a time finding a reliable and intelligent partner who'd work with an Asian immigrant who can't drive.

They both hold irritating part-time jobs, though at this point there's no need to do so. They had these jobs before things got lucrative and, because of a fear they don't understand, they haven't quit. They know that seeing someone go off to work on a regular schedule keeps any neighbors from being too interested and the routine keeps their minds calm and occupied for the few days before any gig.

Yuk Tang works as an aide in an old-age home out on Main South. Darcey drives a shuttle van for the Center for Experimental Biochemistry. Yuk Tang pushes around a cart twenty hours a week, placing tiny cups of ginger ale and apple juice into palsied hands. He pulls lit cigarettes out of sleeping mouths and helps pick up people who have slid out of chairs to the floor. Darcey drives a two-year-old silver Ford van back and forth, every twenty minutes, down the same boring stretch of tree-lined road, dropping off and picking up people who, for all he knows, could be world famous. They all carry large manila envelopes and ask about the weather. They're condescending without meaning to be. About ninety percent of them are Asian, which amuses and annoys Darcey at the same time. It makes him look funny at Yuk Tang sometimes, even in the middle of a job.

Lately though, Yuk and Darcey's luck won't let up. It's good and it's steady. It's like they can do no wrong. Storm windows are missing from the shrubbery side of the house. Rolex watches are left out on the bathroom vanity. Ten hundred-dollar bills, all brand new and banded together, are found by accident underneath a thirteen-inch Trinitron when they move it off its stand. Street lights are out. Dogs have died or been shipped down to Florida. It's getting scary, it's so damned easy.

Then there's a moment in this lawyer's place up in Windsor Hills. Because things have been so sweet, Darcey and Yuk Tang have been pushing it up in the Hills. They've talked about setting a monthly limit on jobs in the Hills. They kicked numbers back and forth on the way to

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this lawyer's house. Yuk Tang wanted to play it simple, a given number of houses in the area in any thirty-day period. Darcey, thinking of his club, figured it would be better to work up until they hit an agreed gross. They decided nothing and drove the last block to the job in silence.

They'd been given the word on the house two days before. Attorney and Mrs. Bennett stopped at the Avondale Animal Hotel on their way to the airport. Darcey drove past the Bennett home after work and filled out his checklist. He drove by again with Yuk Tang and they spent a few minutes discussing it over a small dinner plate at The Grille. Though neither one will acknowledge it, they know they didn't give this gig the attention it requires. But it's hard when things have been coming so easy. It's like they're working with the guardian angel of thieves and he doesn't want a cut.

Then, in the midst of lifting a Toshiba receiver out of its slot in an enormous media wall, Darcey's beeper goes off. He nearly has a coronary and drops the receiver and it breaks on the hardwood floor. Yuk Tang runs down from the bedrooms, glares at him in the doorway and motions a thumb outside. They leave with half the potential take. In the car — a semi-restored MG — Yuk Tang, ever the minimalist, says only, "You're not thinking," and Darcey comes back with a loud, "Screw you, Bruce Lee. Find me a phone booth."

There's a tension that grows in the quiet. Yuk Tang only recently confided in Darcey that Bruce Lee was a real spiritual hero to him, that at night he said what Darcey might consider prayers to Bruce Lee. Darcey, in the driver's seat, knows he's screwed up for the first time since their streak began. It's no big problem. No one is hurt or pinched. But the stupidity of bringing the pager on a job has brought him next door to panic. He knows what to do on a job like he knows his own name. Like he knows how to breathe.

Darcey swings into a drug store lot and uses the phone outside. The page turns out to be from Scalley, who's excited and confused: He's got some information. He's not sure Darcey's interested. He's talking second-hand tip here. He needs a few dollars. He hasn't eaten in two days. He thinks he has a fever. He's leaving tonight on a plane for Ensenada or Buenos Aires.

Darcey has to scream into the phone to get him to quiet down. He tells

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Scalley to be at the Menard Diner in twenty minutes, jumps back in the car and starts to head for the Menard without consulting Yuk Tang. Yuk Tang, not normally a hateful or violent man, daydreams as they drive, too fast, to the meeting. He imagines Bruce Lee holding Darcey above his head, Darcey's terrified body parallel with the ground, Bruce Lee's arms expanding with muscle and tension, waiting to snap this careless thief in two.

The Menard is one of the best of the many diners in Quinsigamond, always clean and almost never crowded. They sit in the wooden booth near the exit for close to an hour, getting wired on too many coffees. Darcey would like to talk, but thinks Yuk Tang might take this as an apology and a sign of weakness. A kind of peace gets made when Darcey orders a veal cutlet sandwich and Yuk Tang puts half the money on the table and says, "I don't think your friend is coming."

Darcey nods and pushes the money back at Yuk Tang.

"I don't think we would have wanted what he had to offer," says Yuk Tang.

"Little hard to say at this point," Darcey says, cracking his knuckles and immediately regretting it. "I didn't think you ate meat."

"I'm a flexible man," Yuk Tang says.

Darcey nods again, readies himself and says, "About the crap with the pager...."

"I don't think we need to talk about that," says Yuk Tang. "Am I right?"

"You're right," Darcey says, and he slides out of their booth and up to the counter to hurry along the sandwich.

At the end of the counter, on the last seat on the left, sits an elderly man that he hadn't noticed before. As he looks at the man, he thinks the guy might be blind. The man's eyes have that rigid, unmoving stare. The man holds a full soup spoon an inch from his lips but doesn't blow on it or sip at it. Darcey has an urge to speak to the guy that he buries.

The fry-boy hauls up the cutlet from the grease and Darcey's tongue goes a little wet. He's about to ask for two large milks when the blind man, the old man he thinks is blind, says, "Would you be Mr. Darcey?" in a quiet voice you'd use to talk to someone next to you. The voice contains an accent that gives the man away as a foreigner, but won't get more specific.

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Darcey looks over his shoulder to Yuk Tang, who holds out his right hand, palm down, like this were some signal between the two of them. Darcey turns back to the old man and, like he's been called before the Pope, he walks down the aisle and slides onto the stool next to him.

"That's right. I'm Darcey," he says.

"I'm George Lewis," the old man says and sinks his spoonful of soup back in his bowl, uneaten. The name doesn't sound foreign and as he turns his head, Darcey wonders why he had the impression this guy was blind.

"Do I know you, Mr. Lewis?" Darcey asks.

"You do look familiar," Lewis says, "but I really doubt we know each other. I haven't been in Quinsigamond in years. Actually, I'm just passing through tonight."

He looks at Darcey's face and decides to continue. "I'm really just an accidental messenger," he says and pulls a long white envelope from the pocket of his raincoat.

"From a friend of yours, I assume," he says, "a Mr. Scalley. He asked me to say that he had to leave and to give you this."

The envelope has been folded over and *Darce* is written across it in what looks like a child's handwriting.

"I've been here awhile," Darcey says, even but firm.

Lewis stirs his thick orange soup and after a minute says, "Yes, well, you don't look a bit like your friend described you."

The night's not going well. Darcey wishes he'd just remembered to leave the damn pager on his bureau. He feels as if forgetting about the pager is the first domino in a long row, just falling over. Scalley would be number two. George Lewis, with his eyes and his voice, he might be three.

Darcey nods to George Lewis and mouths the word *thanks*. He walks backward, pulling money out of his pocket and placing it on the counter to his right. Yuk Tang slips out of their booth, mixes his money with Darcey's, and thanks the fry-boy. He lifts the sandwich off the plate, one half in each hand and tomato sauce oozing down the sides, and follows Darcey out of the Menard.

In the car, they sit for moment, both a little shaken. To calm himself, Yuk Tang begins arranging the sandwiches on the glove box door like this were a formal banquet. He finds napkins from various drive-thru restaurants, packets of salt and pepper, tubes of ketchup and mustard. When he

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comes across a container of duck sauce, he eases it out the window.

Darcey opens the envelope, reads it once, looks at Yuk Tang without expression, and hands the letter over. Yuk Tang sucks tomato sauce off his thumb and reads:

Darce,

I'm screwed. Sorry I can't get that 200 to you. I know you'll understand. You and Bruce Lee go easy. I got no time. I'm heading south. You know what to say when you get the calls on me. Thanks for your time and my new teeth. I'm glad I could show you all those horror movies you would have missed otherwise. Go easy.

Scalley

P.S.

Here's something better than the 200 bucks: 99 Usher. Up in Windsor. A doctor and his wife. No dog. They're doing some cruise. Cheap bastards. Discount store alarms (batteries are prob. dead already). Could be a good haul. Look close for specialty items. Sorry.

Yuk Tang hands the letter back to Darcey as if it were evidence in a trial. It ends up with a red tomato stain despite his attempt to be careful. Darcey folds the letter several times, lifts his behind off his seat, and crams the paper into a back pocket.

They sit in silence, watching cars run down Orbis Ave. until Darcey says, "What the hell you figure got into the little bastard?"

Yuk Tang stares forward, takes a breath, and says, "I think we know what got into your friend. I think we should discuss retirement."

Darcey reaches over and pulls his half of the veal cutlet off the glove box door. He decides to ignore Yuk Tang and says aloud to himself, "And how the hell did he get to the Menard before me? The little shmuck is late for everything. He gets there, writes a half-assed note, gives it to some weird old fart at the counter, and gets on the road before I pull in?"

In an attempt to be taken seriously, Yuk Tang's voice drops to a

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whisper. He says, "You can ignore me. This is fine, ignore me. But we both know there's a problem here. Something scared your friend Scalley enough to make him run. Do you really want to wait around and find out what it is?"

Darcey licks across the front of his lips, swallows hard and says to Yuk Tang, "First of all, stop calling the little bastard my friend. I hate it when you do that. My friend. Jesus. And second, you little wuss, you don't cut and run because some half-retarded scumbag gets a tough question and decides to tour South America. Goddammit."

"We could vacation," says Yuk Tang. "Just for a little while."

Darcey turns, mouth bulging with veal and bread, and says, "It's this pager crap, isn't it? You're spooked because of this pager crap. Christ Almighty."

They chew in the dark, watch lights go on and off in the apartments over the storefronts. When he finishes his sandwich, as if he's decided to give in to things he can't change or understand, Yuk Tang says, meekly, "So you want to do this Usher job?"

Darcey, unsure if this is a challenge or not, says, "You're damn right."

The quiet comes again. At one point they turn at the same moment, and look in the windows of The Menard Diner. Neither one says a word. George Lewis has left his soup and his stool and walked out of the diner.

AT THE MOTHER of Angels Home, Yuk Tang is having a confusing day. He's followed two move-patient memos and found the wrong people in the rooms. A new carton of ammonia bottles was missing from the supply closet. Though he looked everywhere for Mr. Bernard Cooper from 319, the new nurse swears that Mr. Cooper did *not* die overnight. Yuk has put down six Extra-Strength Tylenol, but his headache seems to be getting worse. His stomach's off and he can't bear the thought of macaroni and cheese for lunch. He's got more than one bad feeling about tonight.

Passing out ancient paperbacks in the dayroom — a Zane Grey for Mr. Ash, a Harlequin for Mrs. Wiclif — he thinks about jumping on a train after work. No call to Darcey. No explanation. But as he sits to read the first page of *Tex Buckley's Ambush* to Mr. Kerrigan, he puts the thought out of his mind. As always, he'll do the honorable thing. He'll work

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tonight and let things happen. He'll do the Usher job and give over to fate.

Yuk Tang finds the nurses' lounge empty so he stops for a minute to rest and make a cup of tea. He closes the door and takes a few deep breaths. He wishes they had a couple of days to confirm some information. To double-check a few facts and drive through Windsor Hills with a stopwatch and a clipboard. But if the Usher job is going to happen, it has to be tonight. For a lot of reasons, one of them being their mutual diminishing nerve.

There's an old metal coat rack in the corner, next to the table that holds Mister Coffee. Hooked on it are three or four nurses uniforms, simple white dresses that end at the knee. He guesses that they're Doreen's. They're fresh from the dry-cleaners, starched and looking perfect on separate wire hangers covered with cellophane. Yuk Tang lifts the sleeve of the top uniform and pulls up the cellophane. He holds it close to his nose and breathes in the fresh laundry smell. He takes it off the coat rack hook and looks to the neck for the size. He presses the uniform against the front of his body and holds out his arm and the sleeve, comparing lengths.

And that's when he's engulfed in the pleasing smell of pipe tobacco. He turns around and sees, in the doorway, standing rigid and staring, a tall man with a dark complexion. The man is dressed in a well-tailored business suit. It's impossible to tell his age. Though he seems fit and agile and in command of himself, something makes Yuk Tang want to estimate that the guy is as old as anyone in the Mother of Angels. He's clean-shaven. In one hand he cradles the pipe. It's white, maybe ivory, and carved into a shape that Yuk Tang can't make out.

Yuk Tang puts the uniform back on the hook and, forgetting his normal politeness, says, "You really shouldn't be in here."

In his left hand, the man holds a leather suitcase that makes Yuk Tang suspect he's a pharmaceutical salesman trying to catch Dr. Brophy. Though the case looks heavy, the man keeps it in his hand, at his side. He takes several steps into the lounge and says, "Would you be Mr. Tang?"

Without thinking, Yuk Tang reaches into his smock pocket for a Tylenol, but finds none. He repeats, "You really shouldn't be in here. Is there someone I can help you find?"

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The man eases into one of the blue plastic seats opposite Yuk Tang and says, "I'm Mr. Estrada. I believe you're expecting me?"

Yuk Tang's stomach heaves. He clenches his back molars and shakes his head "no."

Mr. Estrada is undisturbed. He says, "No matter," and for the first time, looks around the lounge. His eyes end up back on Yuk Tang and he says, "I'm glad we can finally get together. I've come to you about a purchase."

Yuk Tang stays quiet and Mr. Estrada reaches to his back pocket and takes out a handkerchief. He dabs at his forehead and says, "Could you tell me when we might be ready to make the transaction?"

Yuk Tang repeats, "Transaction."

Mr. Estrada closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. His eyes open and he seems on the verge of being angry. He says, "I assure you I'm fluid. And I'm not attempting to negotiate at this late date. You people have my word, three times the estimated book value with the payout in equal parts diamonds, bullion, and your choice of currency, though my people asked me to propose to you the option of paying the final third in dinar, for the obvious reasons of speed and convenience. You can trust that I forewarned them that, most likely, this would not be acceptable."

Yuk Tang has no idea what to say. He wishes the nurses would file in laughing, having put this drug salesman up to a practical joke. He says, "I'm sorry, sir, you have me a little confused."

Mr. Estrada's face goes rigid. Then his mouth broadens into a smile and he gives out a short bark of a laugh. "Business is booming, I see," he says and Yuk Tang laughs with him, relieved but just as confused.

Mr. Estrada folds his hands on the table and says softly, "Obviously we have a few missed connections here. I'm very sorry. My party is interested specifically in the Belgrano volume."

"Belgrano," Yuk Tang says.

"Yes. The Belgrano volume," Mr. Estrada says. "Though it has been mentioned, and I shouldn't be telling you this, but it has been mentioned that if things work out suitably here, there could be a future commission arrangement for yourself and Mr. Darcey."

Darcey's name hits him like a slap. He says, "I think you've

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confused me with someone else." He's on the verge of being giddy with fear.

Mr. Estrada doesn't react immediately. Then he stands, nods and whispers, "I understand." He takes a business card from his suitcoat pocket and slides it across the table toward Yuk Tang. He turns precisely and moves out of the lounge.

Yuk Tang takes the card. It's white and blank. He flips it over. Hand-printed in tiny block letters, it reads: *Belgrano 552-7263.*

WITH PERSISTENCE and careful planning, Darcey has used the past month to turn his day job into an intricate and compulsive game. He found this necessary because of the boredom factor inherent in the constant five minute, twenty-mile-an-hour van runs between the various labs of the Foundation. There were start-up expenses right off the bat to get the game underway — a Discman and a huge assortment of CDs (mostly 1950's collections from the discount bins), some stationery supplies and, though it really wasn't necessary, a thick rock 'n' roll encyclopedia.

Darcey makes thirty sweeps a day around the Foundation's grounds. On the last sweep of his day, he often says, "Last call for the ovens," and lets the doctors wonder. The doctors could easily walk the short route between the labs. The grounds are beautiful and there are paths lined by flowerbeds. But the shuttle van supposedly saves precious time and there was money allotted for it. Darcey's not about to complain. He loves the job. He's come to rely on the monotony. The monotony gave birth to his game and the game has come into its own. It has started to grow and expand and take advantage of a number of possibilities.

The game originally used a basic point system and three testing categories. Category One involved beginning and ending the short drive at five-minute intervals exactly, points being deducted for seconds off, either fast or slow. Category Two involved knowing the exact wording of all the lyrics on any given CD, picked at random from a paper bag. Darcey started with a Sam Cooke disc and got hooked, so he stayed with the artist for two weeks and called it pre-season exhibition. Category Three — Darcey's personal favorite — involved how many times in a day he could

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speed off, just as a passenger was about to catch the shuttle. Last month he began awarding himself bonus points for random and spur of the moment achievements. And lately, things have gotten completely out of hand. There are now subcategories and half-points, challenges that involve the Ford's tire pressure and the amount of miles driven per gallon of gas. The scoring has gotten algebraic. Days of the week and times of the day have new and complex meanings. Darcey has begun keeping the long and complicated scores and results and ratings in a fat, spiral notebook. At the end of his shift, he leaves it in the van under the driver's seat.

Today, after he clears out everyone on the last stop at the ovens and spends a few minutes jotting down the scores from his last round, he pops Sam Cooke into the player and cranks the volume. He sings along to "Chain Gang" at the top of his lungs on the drive to the Foundation's garage. He parks before the song is over and so leaves the motor idling while he and Sam Cooke finish out the number. Then he turns off the key and as he reaches around to lock the sliding back door, a man in the far back seat says, "Good afternoon, Mr. Darcey."

Darcey's arm smashes into the steering wheel and the horn sounds.

"Jesus Christ," he yells.

The man is apologetic. He holds an arm out before him and says, "I'm sorry, I...," but Darcey again says, "Jesus Christ."

They sit in silence for a second and Darcey catches his breath and finally lifts his head and says, "You stupid bastard, you nearly gave me a goddamn heart attack."

The man tries, "Again, I'm sorry," his voice strange and calming.

Darcey's angry and embarrassed. He says, "What the hell are you doing in here? I thought I dropped everyone at the ovens."

"The ovens?" the man asks.

Darcey wipes at his face and begins to settle himself.

"Goddamn," he says. "You almost took me out."

They look at each other over the distance of the van. The man is dressed for rain in a heavy trench coat. It's fully buttoned and he has the collar turned up. Darcey suddenly thinks that the guy might have fallen asleep. He decides to sit, look menacing, and wait for an explanation.

"I apologize for startling you," the man says. He accents some of his words in the wrong places. "I thought it was in our mutual interest to

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speak alone. I had thought you might be expecting me. I'm Mr. Rochelle."

Darcey stays quiet, looks out into the garage and tries to think. Finally he says, "Yeah, well, I'm sorry I jumped. I was listening to the music. You spooked me." He pauses and squints at Mr. Rochelle. "So, I'm locking up now."

Rochelle gives no indication that he intends to leave the van. It's as if he's made it his home and he won't be evicted. He says, "I have people who are extremely interested in a recent acquisition of yours." He doesn't appear angry, just intent.

Darcey thinks about jumping out of the van, but instead he says, "I'm afraid I don't understand you. Do you want me to drive you back to the labs? Did you fall asleep?"

Mr. Rochelle looks confused. He glances down at his shoes and then back up at Darcey and says, "Mr. Darcey, are we not alone? Is there a problem?"

Darcey can't help getting edgy. He says, "I think you've got the problem, friend. We don't know each other."

Mr. Rochelle breaks in with an easy, "Of course not."

Darcey says, "Well, I've got to go. You want to spend the night in the van, that's fine with me." He pulls up on the door handle. The ceiling light snaps on.

Mr. Rochelle doesn't flinch. He stares at Darcey for a minute and then reaches into a coat pocket and removes something. His hands are so large they cover the entire object. Darcey feels a little nauseated. Mr. Rochelle looks into his hand at a note card or picture, then replaces it. He sighs and smiles and says, "Mr. Darcey, this is not professional behavior on your part. Please sit."

Darcey closes the van door.

"Is this a problem with money, Mr. Darcey?" Mr. Rochelle asks. "You should know better than that. My people are not interested in bargains. They are not looking for a ...," his eyes turn to the side as if he'll spot the word he's searching for out the window. They turn back on Darcey and he says, carefully, "flea market."

He smiles, pleased with himself and, he hopes, Darcey. "I'm sure you are aware of the extent to which they will go," he says. "Within reason, of course."

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Darcey repeats, "Of course."

Mr. Rochelle continues, "Very simply, my people mean to acquire, from you and Mr. Tang, the Bikaner volume you recently removed from Dr. Hawthorne's residence."

Darcey's breath starts coming hard. He hates the idea that he and Yuk Tang have been mentioned in the same sentence. He'd bet both their lives that this has to do with that scumbag Scalley and his note in the Menard. And then he remembers the note. Word for word.

99 Usher
Up in Windsor
A doctor and his wife.

Goddamn Scalley, he thinks. And goddamn that phone-pager.

Darcey wants to leave, to be out of the van and the garage. Out of Quinsigamond. He says, "I have to discuss a few things with my partner."

Mr. Rochelle sighs again, then says, "Very well," and moves to the front of the van. He presses a small card into Darcey's hand. He climbs out the side door and into the darkness of the garage.

USHER DRIVE IS a cul-de-sac. It branches off from Cromwell and bends, like a short, twisted arm of civilization interrupting Kingstown Woods. Kingstown Woods is a well-tended preserve that borders Windsor Hills, ropes it off from everything around it, as if nature gave the Hill's residents their own buffer-zone as a gift.

Usher Drive is the most remote and isolated street in the Hills, but it's still entirely part of Windsor. It fulfills all the requirements. For a house to be part of Windsor Hills, it has to have a certain privileged and stable look. The homes are all oversized Colonials. Solid brick, a lot of them with ivy running up the walls. Five bedrooms and up. Three- and four-car garages. Long and curving brick or flagstone walks and perfect lawns that roll into a lake of mulch.

Darcey and Yuk Tang wait in the rented Jaguar down below the Hills. Once they break over the line and drive up, that's it — head for the job, hit it, and get out. Time, during Windsor Hills jobs, becomes even

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more of an important factor than it normally is. Time becomes everything.

They've left the MG behind, an unusual move and one that bothers Darcey. Though he doesn't doubt the speed and performance of the Jaguar, he's intimate with the MG. He knows how and when to push it. There's a cushion of instinct when he has the MG. But, as Yuk Tang found out — and Darcey will admit it's a worthy idea — Dr. Hawthorne's out-of-town son drives an olive green Jaguar. An olive green Jaguar has parked often in the Hawthorne driveway, so it wouldn't jar any neighbors' eyes.

Darcey and Yuk Tang sit below the Hills, both wishing they were someplace else. They wish they were sitting on fat, foreign bank books and studying difficult languages on a beach with white sand. They're having trouble concentrating. They've lost all the calmness that once came so naturally.

Yuk Tang did some checking with a few normally reliable people. He runs it down for Darcey: The guy's a surgeon. Due for retirement. Comes from old money — his old man was a surgeon. Married forever. They've got one kid, a son, who's doing a residency at Johns Hopkins. The old man's got a houseful of awards. He's a world traveler with a big interest in the Middle East. He's tight about weird stuff — won't eat in the better restaurants, wears the same clothes forever, and, bingo, the one that counts, won't spend the money for an alarm system.

But there's not a word about Dr. Hawthorne being any kind of collector. Even when Yuk Tang put out some dollars. Not a word about antiques, paintings, coins or stamps, wine. Nothing. So, they're going in cold, no idea what to look for or where to start looking. That, combined with the time factor, does not make for an easy night. They know going in that they can't be as neat and careful and professional as they'd like.

The Hawthorne house sits near the end of Usher. Because of the age of the houses in Windsor, the lots are only a half-acre. That doesn't give them the best border protection. They'll have to be frugal with noise and light. They've decided on mid-to-early evening, nine o'clock, because of the rented Jaguar/visiting son angle.

The house is number six. Mid-sized. Brick with black shutters. A standard, moneyed Yankee estate. Darcey would've bet the owner was a doctor or a judge. Classy but subtle. A huge front door with a golden eagle

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above it. Fake "alarm protected" certificates pasted into the corners of the front windows. It's like they put out a neon sign that they're on vacation. Took a commuter-time ad on a popular radio station. There isn't a light left on and the drapes are pulled tight across all the windows. The place looks like a tomb.

They pull slowly into the driveway and cut the engine. Yuk Tang moves into the entryway, takes a stack of banded mail out of the mailbox, and stands, easily and patiently shuffling through it. He wears latex gloves and tries to ignore the feeling they give him. Several letters have foreign postmarks, and on one the return address is in another language. Arabic, he thinks.

Darcey moves fast to the most hidden side of the house. He finds some good protection behind an out-of-control shrub. He cuts the screen out of the storm window frame and lays the mesh against the bush. He takes a diaper from beneath his jersey, lays it against the window. Takes a flashlight from his waist and smashes in the pane, then reaches in and up carefully and grabs the plastic alarm box that rests on the lip of the casing. He muffles the momentary honk against his body, then dumps the battery and box beneath the bush. He enters into the dining room, takes a breath and calms himself and lets his eyes adjust to the darkness.

He finds his way to the living room and the front door, but tenses up when he discovers that it's locked with a dead-bolt. He can feel Yuk Tang's nerves beginning to fray on the other side of the door. On instinct, Darcey lifts a cushion on a cane-back child's chair, positioned by a coat rack to the side of the door. He finds the key, a thick Yale, turns off and removes the alarm box that's hanging from the doorknob by a plastic strap, and lets Yuk Tang in.

They stare at each other in the dim foyer, both waiting for the other to flinch, to move back out the door and into the Jaguar. Finally, Yuk Tang looks to the floor and Darcey clears his throat. They've made a vague plan about splitting up once inside and taking different rooms, but now the plan seems useless.

"All right, let's get at it," says Darcey, and Yuk Tang moves instantly out of the room and up the stairs in the hallway. Darcey thinks Yuk Tang is being a fool. Instinct tells him that they'll find what they're after on the first floor of the house. He steps into the living room and snaps on a dim

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light on a sidetable by a huge leather chair. He guesses the bulb is about forty watts and laughs to himself at cheap Doc Hawthorne. He imagines the old surgeon suddenly at a desk somewhere in the house, scribbling on the backs of grocery lists his wife tried to throw out, squinting under the forty watts of illumination and figuring how many gall bladders or tonsils he has to chop out to equal the year's electric bill.

Trying not to think about what he's doing, Darcey eases himself into the leather chair. He sits back and lifts his legs onto the matching ottoman. It's a comfortable chair. He could sleep or eat in it. He can hear Yuk Tang upstairs going through drawers. He knows he should be up and moving, thinking on his feet, but he tells himself this is a new approach. He'll sit and think about the best single place to look for *specialty items*. He doesn't care that his new approach is most likely brought on by panic or that he hasn't felt panic on a job, even in the worst of situations, in five or six years.

He loves the leather chair and regrets that he can't take it with him. He can picture the perfect spot in his apartment for it. Something made of glass falls and breaks upstairs and Darcey knows Yuk Tang is just as rattled.

Darcey takes a long look around the room. Everything appears normal. There's a fireplace, sofa, framed portraits, floor lamps, small tables covered with bells and photographs and small crystal figurines. There's a small upright piano across the room, pushed against a wall, and Darcey would bet that no one in the house can play it well. There are dozens of things, right here around him, in easy reach, that he could pocket and turn over in a day. But none of them are what he came for.

He wonders if he could live here. In Doc Hawthorne's house. He wonders what it feels like to be Doc Hawthorne's son. Does the kid call the old man up and ask technical questions about tough cases? He can picture them, the cheap bastards, both sitting in dark rooms, late in the evening when the rates are low, talking about people they've cut open and the things they've found inside.

The thought pumps Darcey up. He pulls himself out of the chair and bounces on the balls of his feet, looking around the room. He takes a Swiss Army Knife out of his pocket, opens a blade, and slashes across the seat of the chair. He's never done anything like this on a job. He's never even tracked mud into a house or dropped a cigarette. He feels flighty and

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unsure of himself. He hops up and down in place, tosses the army knife up and down in his hand. He turns and spits on a family portrait hanging on the wall. He picks up two figurines and smacks them together like cars on a wet highway. On an end-table he finds a pair of reading glasses and tries them on. The room seems to bend. He takes them off, squats, and places them on the carpet, then stomps, shatters the glass, snaps the arms, grinds the mess under the toe of his boot.

He waits to hear Yuk Tang's voice from upstairs, but he hears only movement, drawers being opened, things hitting the floor. Darcey walks to the piano and opens the key cover, sits on the stool as if he were about to play. He looks over the keys then barely rests some fingers on them. No note sounds. He thinks about pressing down on the keys again, but hesitates. And then a thought hits him. He gets up from the stool and moves to the side of the piano. He tries to raise the top to look in, but it won't budge. When he tries again, harder, his side of the piano swings away from the wall. The opposite side is hinged to the wall making the entire thing a huge, bulky door.

Darcey puts his hand over his mouth and tries to think. What he wants to do is to grab Yuk Tang and start driving south. Secondary highways. Drive-thru food. Dump the Jaguar in some thick southern forest, and pick up something common but fast. For reasons he doesn't understand just now, he'd like to get hold of Scalley and break all of his straight new teeth.

Behind the piano is a hole in the wall. There's imitation walnut molding that makes it look like a weird low window frame. It's roughly three feet by three feet and it's too dark to see what's on the other side.

Darcey feels as if time is slipping away from him. He feels incapable of making small decisions. Suddenly, he can't recall the layout of the downstairs of the house. Wasn't there an open hallway on the other side of the living room wall? It's like his brain is punishing him for lack of sleep. He would bet serious dollars that *specialty items* are through this door, this window. He wishes there were a stranger here to give him direction. He wishes Mr. Rochelle would speak to him harshly. Throw money at him and order him through the hole.

And, as if he has received orders, he scrambles. He throws himself, off balance, onto the floor and through the opening. As if he were diving into

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freezing waters and couldn't get an idea of depth. He stays on his hands and knees, wishing his heart would stop racing, but it's no use. He's so aware of the possibilities that lie in the next few minutes that there's no chance of keeping calm and unimpressed. The trick here, he thinks, might be to avoid any extensive thought, to operate like some determined animal or tremendously reliable machine. The trick, most likely, is to avoid thinking about why or how he has come to be in this position.

He pulls his flashlight from his pocket and thumbs it on.

He sees books.

He is in a small compartment, a vault maybe, loaded with books. He shoots the light up and down the walls rapidly and sees shelf after shelf of books. His breath comes slowly as he turns, on his knees, in a circle. The room is about a six-by-six square box, lined on all sides by thick metal shelves. And the shelves are completely covered. Volume after volume. Most of them look very old and the words that he sees on some spines are written in foreign languages. He expects to smell a musty odor but there's none. He moves into a sitting position and stays still, his legs tucked in as if he were about to meditate.

He knows he should get Yuk Tang but decides against it. He looks around trying to get comfortable with the vault, trying to notice as much as possible. Beyond books, there are a few other items: a golden bowl, or at least a bowl that once looked gold but now is tarnished and junky. It's filled with letters and postcards and a magnifying glass. His flashlight reflects back at him and his heart pounds and when he follows the beam to a corner where the wall meets the ceiling, he sees a tiny window, no bigger than a half-dollar, and round. He stands carefully to look. The ceiling is only an inch or two above his head. The round thick pane has a syrupy look to it. Darcey puts his eye to the glass and can see the night sky, stars and light from the moon.

He knows he's going to have to decide what to take soon and this bothers him. How can he know? He sits again in front of the gold bowl and notices, for the first time, candles on either side of it, secured in elaborate gold candlesticks. Automatically, he pulls out a butane lighter from his pocket and sparks the candles. The vault gets brighter. He starts to relax a little, then is startled by the idea of flames so close to all these books. But he can't bring himself to blow out the candles.

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He stares without really focusing at a wall of books. Darcey would never describe himself as a reader to anyone. Now and then he goes on a binge with the crossword puzzle books, tears through them with no problem, word after word and page after page. And occasionally he'll read one of those Louis L'Amour westerns. Sometimes, a mystery. Espionage stuff. A fact that Darcey understands now is that he has never thought a great deal about books. He has never considered them a moveable property. He always thought stamps and wine were as weird as it got.

He reaches to a close shelf and starts taking down volumes and piling them next to his legs. They're all heavy. Much heavier than he'd have bet. They don't feel like normal books that he sees around. There are no illustrations on the covers. No pictures of the authors on the back. The bindings are all smooth and cold as if the vault were a refrigerator. He picks the books up, holds them, runs his hands over them and reads the titles, when he can, off the spines.

There are two short, slim white volumes — *Vortigern and Rowena* and *Henry II.* There's a pamphlet sealed in plastic called *The Diagnosis and Treatment of Bibliophagia.* Darcey thinks about breaking open the seal and taking a look. He thinks there'd be some great pictures in that one. He picks up *The Courier's Tragedy and other Jacobean Revenge Plays* and puts it down. Glances at *More Astronomical Studies, R.A. Locke & S. John Herschel; Rappaccini's Other Daughter* by Auberpiner; *The Life and Death of Og of Bason; Recipes and Cocktails for a New State* by Ernst Toller. His eyes linger on *Travels in North America: Quinsigamond* by Chesterton, then he throws it to the side. He pulls a thick and tall volume called *A History of Bitic Literature, Vol. 1,* into his lap. He judges its weight and lets it slide to the floor. He tosses on top of it *The Babel Catalogue: Argentina Ed., 1899.* He breathes deeply and feels confused and nauseated.

Darcey can find no order or category to the books. They're published in different years, in different languages. There are plays and medical texts, histories and cookbooks, atlases and bibles. He begins to have hateful and destructive thoughts. Like torching this goddamn vault. Torching Doc Hawthorne's whole house. Driving the rented Jaguar off the Havelock Cliffs. Maybe with Yuk Tang locked in the trunk.

He decides to pocket the magnifying glass that's in the gold bowl. As

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he reaches for it, he notices, underneath the thick stack of bulging envelopes, the top of a package wrapped in brown paper. He pulls it out. It looks like a large brown brick. It's addressed to Doc Hawthorne and it hasn't been opened. Darcey rips off layers of brown wrapper. He pulls and tears at the paper, getting frustrated and tense, but finally uncovering a book. Another book. It's old, not in great shape, and bound in cloth. The front is blank, but on the spine are the words *Holy Writ* and beneath them, *Bombay.*

Darcey's not sure why he's excited. He moves closer to the two candles and licks his lips. As he begins to open the volume, a cough explodes behind him and his heart and lungs collapse for a second. He falls to the side and awkwardly turns his body. The book stays in his hand, shaking.

In front of him, in the opening to the vault, shoulders hunched and on his knees, is Yuk Tang. Darcey has lost his voice. Yuk Tang lets his head fall to the side and in the dim light, Darcey gets a better look: Yuk Tang's face is completely made up. He looks like a rodeo clown. He has on lipstick, rouge, mascara, false eyelashes. There are long, dangling diamond earrings hanging from his earlobes and around his shoulders is some kind of fur stole.

Yuk Tang leans into the vault. Darcey begins to rise and Yuk Tang swings his arm forward and catches Darcey solidly above the eye. Darcey falls backward. He has no idea what has hit him. Something heavy and metal. A wide and fast stream of blood is making its way from Darcey's skull down his face. He tries to move and falls back against a shelf of books. He watches with one eye as Yuk Tang withdraws from the vault. The light from the living room closes out and he hears a metalic click as the piano comes flush against the wall.

Now two streams of blood make their way in a slow race down Darcey's right cheek and past the corner of his mouth. His tongue comes out and licks at his own blood, hesitantly at first, and then furiously. The tongue twists and stabs, trying for the thick lines of red. There is an ache that takes over his skull, obliterates everything else for a time, and then eases off, leaves just a dizzying and constant echo of pain and confusion. Darcey thinks he hears his own voice and gets startled, sits up to listen, but gets dizzy and falls back to the floor.

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He rests his head against books and time goes by. He dozes and wakes, dreams quickly and mumbles to himself. His eyes blink open and closed, one continually bathed in a fresh wash of blood. He has confusing, rapidly changing nightmares: Yuk Tang and Darcey, buried alive in a cave. Yuk Tang and Darcey buried alive in a rented, olive green Jaguar. Buried alive in the Menard Diner, an earthquake or avalanche throwing walls of mud and rock up on the roof and against the stained glass windows, sealing them in. And himself, alone and helpless, all energy run out a hole in his body, being carried into a raging ocean in the arms of George Lewis, carried like a sleeping child into deafening surf, and the ocean changes form, becomes a heaving sea of books, encyclopedias and dictionaries, ebbing and banking, swallowing broken Darcey under an endless wave.

His good eye opens then closes. It opens again. He forces vision. The vault seems to be getting darker, the flame from the candles seems to be shrinking, flickering. He looks up the wall of books opposite him, to the half-dollar window in the corner, and he thinks he sees blue and white lights revolving, lighting the circle of sky and then leaving it.

He would bet something will happen soon. In his lap is the *Holy Writ* from *Bombay*. He opens the cover and several pages slide under his fingers. He tilts his head and tries to focus his eye and makes a ridiculous effort to read. An almost perfect way of killing time.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

SIGNING OFF

IN JOSEPH Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the dying words spoken deep in the jungles of the Congo by the evil Kurtz are, "The horror! The horror!" Cesar Vallejo, the brilliant Peruvian poet, ends one of his most powerful poems, "The Starving Man's Rack," with the words, "This is horror." Though the two authors are referring respectively to a spiritual bottomland and abject poverty, both are talking about essentially the same thing: the inescapable. That is the basic element of effective horror, be it fiction or film — the thing we cannot elude, no matter how desperately we try. Monster, disaster, occult shadow. Andromeda Strain or Bubba with a chainsaw. Whatever the horror evoked may be, it must have the aura of inescapability in order to be scary, thus making it all the more gratifying when an escape succeeds.

It's unclear from listening to M. Night Shyamalan talk about his latest film, *Signs*, whether he intended to make a horror movie — he stresses the film's theme: faith and the nature of human spirituality. Whatever his stated intention, *Signs* has been advertised as a horror movie *(Don't See It Alone)*; it indulges in the conventions of the genre (sudden shocks, fleeting glimpses, ominous camera angles, et al); and it borrows its setup and core structure from one of the most famous and effective of all horror movies, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. In both *Dead* and *Signs* a group of people are trapped inside a Pennsylvania farmhouse while outside, evil creatures attempt to break in and kill them, creatures whose incidence is not localized but part of a worldwide crisis. The salient difference between

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the films is that the zombies of "Dead" — though brain-dead — succeed in killing almost everyone in the house; whereas in *Signs*, although they create enormous crop circles on every continent to guide their pilots and cross interstellar space in a massive fleet that parks itself above over 400 cities, the aliens are incapable of breaking into a root cellar. They cannot solve the problem presented by an ax wedged beneath a doorknob.

Inescapable?

Not really.

In addition, the sole alien who engages in a *mano a mano* with the beleaguered family is beaten into submission with a baseball bat wielded by Joaquin Phoenix, cast as ex-minor leaguer Merrill Hess, the brother of Father Graham Hess (Mel Gibson). The bat slots nicely into Shyamalan's thematic structure yet scarcely qualifies as the weapon of choice when one is trying to dispatch a technologically advanced being who, along with his fellows, is harvesting humans for — apparently — food. Nor does it strike me as plausible that such creatures might successfully be locked in a pantry, or that Iranian peasants would be the ones who discover that aliens dissolve in water, as if their flesh were constituted of freeze-dried soup. And it's downright stupid to think a baby monitor would be able to tune in communications from alien ships.

When I was a kid the incontinent bloodhound next door used to wander into my backyard to relieve himself. Mel Gibson is starting to sport a baffled, dopey look that puts me in mind of that old dog, and though he was once an ordinarily blessed actor who thrived in the hands of a good director, he has become a movie star who relies on crudely nuanced facial gestures to produce no good effect. None of the other actors fare much better. There are a few things to praise about *Signs*. Portraying an alien invasion by focusing on a small corner of it makes a nice change from overblown scopefests like *Independence Day*. The editing is excellent, as is the cinematography. But it is as a horror movie that *Signs* must ultimately be judged, and as such it flunks every test.

Once Shyamalan isolates Morgan, Father Hess, and two cute 'n' spunky kids in the cellar, we expect to see alien incursion after alien incursion, walls giving way, ooze seeping up through the concrete, mechanical probes, each menace more chilling than the last, fended off by extremes of human ingenuity.

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All we get is a rattled door, the sound of glass breaking upstairs, footsteps, and alien fingers groping through a ventilation grate. You may not fall asleep, but neither will you jump out of your skin. Father Hess and his family, however, do fall asleep during the assault on their home, making it tough to accept that their straits are dire. The director tosses in a life-threatening asthma attack in an effort to raise the stakes, but it's not enough. In a Stephen King novel the child would die — that's how you raise the stakes. But Shyamalan has not learned or has chosen to ignore this lesson. Rather than seeking to generate more tension, he dissipates it by incorporating into his climactic scene one of a series of flashbacks that explains how Father Hess lost his faith after the death of his wife in a freakish auto accident, a reverie that also provides him with the clue that saves his family, thus causing him — surprise! surprise! — to regain his faith. The New Age prattle served up by the good reverend is glutinous enough to stop Deepak Chopra's heart, and whenever the pace slows to permit a character to preach the script's everything-happens-for-a-reason claptrap, energy dribbles from the film.

After a promising beginning, Shyamalan's last two pictures demonstrate a distinct slippage. Though funded by an intriguing idea, that a superhero might actually exist and be unaware of his potency, *Unbreakable* lacked the focus and deft dissembling of *The Sixth Sense* and meandered toward a tensionless conclusion. In both films, Shyamalan examines relationships involving children whose parents (a single mom and a couple approaching divorce) cannot understand what their progeny are going through. *Sense* manages this successfully, naturalistically, by documenting the mother's sense of helplessness and frustration, and illuminating the child's growth and eventual understanding that he must be the one to bridge the gap. *Unbreakable* is more simplistic in its treatment of the issue — Willis's emerging superhero status ultimately causes his son's eyes to glaze over with awe. In *Signs*, the single parent-child relationship, rather than being explored, is used to manipulate the audience into feeling certain ways at certain times, and this emblematizes the overall ham-fistedness of the film. A national publication has referred to Shyamalan as "the new Spielberg." There are as many differences as similarities between the two directors,

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but Shyamalan's increasing reliance on sentiment and spoken exposition of theme, on manipulative narration as opposed to the structural employment of tension and gradual revelation, trends plainly visible in his three major films, suggests that perhaps he may one day be worthy of this dubious accolade. It might be thought that the success of *Sense* would have freed Shyamalan to make any sort of film, to take risks, to strive for something greater; but the coercive cocktail of ego, power, and greed that success in Hollywood brings to one's lips is far more threatening to a creative flame than failure, and the self-imposed pressures that result from the subsequent high rarely fail to douse it. It will be a significant loss if a filmmaker with the technical competence and populist vision of Shyamalan continues making such flawed films.

Meanwhile, the horror genre in the States continues to lurch along with the usual spate of teenage freak-outs, flicks that celebrate the enduring Hollywood axiom that one can never get enough of attractive boys and girls lusting after each other and getting variously eaten, torn apart, and scared out of their thongs. Devil movies like *End of Days*, *Lost Souls*, and the gloriously dimwitted *Bless the Child* perpetrate the Roman Catholic comic book version of the struggle 'twixt good and evil: Balrog-like demons; ultra-suave guys in black who light cigarettes by snapping their fingers; Vatican hit squads; exorcists by the gaggle. Then there is the woeful legacy left by *The Sixth Sense*: whipped dogs like *What Lies Beneath* and *Dragonfly*, in which, slowed by glacial box office temperatures, Kevin Costner shows signs of sinking from public view into his own personal La Brea tarpit. There seems scant hope of improvement. A remake of the excellent Japanese horror movie, *Ring*, is due out, but as it's directed by Gore Verbinski, the perpetrator of *The Mexican* (easily the worst picture in the careers of both Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts — a factoid that merits a "Wow!"), and stars a cast of unknowns, likely signaling an ensemble of hunks and hunkettes who once did a guest shot on *Dawson's Creek*, one cannot be optimistic. So the horrorhead who is searching for quality must look elsewhere for gratification, and the direction that appears to offer the best chance for this is Far East.

The Asian horror movie reached its popular peak with *Ring*, a complex ghost story involving a psychic

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ghost and a cursed videotape containing disturbing imagery that visits a terrifying death seven days after the viewing upon whomever watches it. *Ring* broke box office records in Asia, generating a good sequel *(Ring II)* and a decent prequel *(Ring Zero)*. In the wake of this trilogy has come a flurry of horror films, some of the gross-out variety, but others that have striven for originality. One of the most entertaining is *Uzumaki*, which recently received a limited release in the States.

Uzumaki means "vortex." In context of the film, vortex refers to every type of spiral form. As the story begins, the schoolgirl heroine, Eriko, comes upon her best friend's father engrossed in videotaping a snail — he has, according to her friend, Fhi Fhan, become obsessed with the spiral in all its incarnations. Over the space of several weeks everyone in the small town where Eriko lives either is possessed by this obsession or becomes victim to a product of it. The most popular girl in Eriko's school begins to wear her hair teased into ornate spirals; another classmate falls to his death down the shaft of a spiral staircase; Eriko's father, a potter, turns a spiral pot for Fhi Fhan's father and becomes prey to the obsession. Before too long, as Eriko and Fhi Fhan attempt to unravel the cause of all this, the consequences of the obsession grow more bizarre. Fhi Fhan's father mutilates himself and contrives an anatomical spiral of his innards before giving up the ghost; crematory smoke forms an enormous sky-filling spiral at the center of which the faces of a newly dead husband and wife are seen; a reporter covering the story drives into a tunnel that proves to be the mouth of an endless spiral; two of Eriko's classmates are transformed into giant snails with spiral shells and take to crawling on the side of the high school. Fhi Fhan eventually twists himself into a living pretzel. Finally only Eriko is left.

Uzumaki's director, Akihiro Higuchinsky, a Ukrainian-born Japanese, blends these materials into a unique black comedy, a cross between H. P. Lovecraft, *Heathers*, and French surrealism, without eschewing the staples of the horror genre — shocks, creepiness, tension, and, of course, the inescapable....

It occurs to me that I may have underestimated the terrifying potentials of *Signs*. After all, what could be more Orwellianly inescapable dread than a system that

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seduces a talented artist and subsequently reduces him to a purveyor of a product so slickly packaged, it causes the public to salivate uncontrollably at the prospect of having their brains oiled with bland toxicity and massaged to the consistency of Play Dough?

"The horror! The horror!"

M. Night Shyamalan may one day look back on his career and say something much the same.

And perhaps if Mister Kurtz were alive today, he might not need to stray so far from home to find his spiritual bottomland.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

ONE OF OUR PRIMARY GOALS is to bring you a great variety of fiction—fantasy, science fiction, some horror fiction, some stories that are hard to define. In the months ahead, these are exactly the goods we'll deliver.

Next month's cover story comes from the prolific Robert Reed, whose story "Buffalo Wolf" carries on with the adventures of a young Native American boy named Raven. (You might remember him from a previous story.) This time out, he's tracking a wolf beyond the limits of his small world. It's a memorable story.

Also on the slate for next month is "Decanting Oblivion," Lawrence C. Connolly's tale of a Pittsburgh bicycle messenger on a nighttime run that's anything but typical.

Other items lined up for the March issue include a Virtual Reality story, an uncanny yarn about a commuter, our regular book and film columns, and lots more.

In the months ahead, we've got an interesting mix of veterans and new writers—some of the contributors waiting in the wings include Dale Bailey, M. Rickert, John Kessel, Adam-Troy Castro, and Barry N. Malzberg. Subscribe now to ensure that you won't miss any of the goodies that lie ahead.

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When he's not reviewing books for us, James Sallis writes mystery novels, biographies, poetry, essays, and lots of correspondence—it seems that no one ever told him that the American way is to do one thing and keep doing it. Or maybe someone did...and inspired this oddment in the process. (Perhaps what's oddest of all is that this provocative piece should happen to wind up in the same issue as "A Game of Chicken.")

The Genre Kid

By James Sallis

SAMMY LEVISON WAS fourteen when he discovered that he could shit little Jesuses. They were approximately three inches tall and perfectly formed, right down to the beard and a suggestion of folds in the robe. Tiny eyes looked out appealingly; one hand was lifted in peaceful greeting. The first came incidentally, but all that was required to repeat the performance, he found, was concentration. Later on Sammy tried pushing out little Buddhas and Mohammeds, but it wasn't the same. He didn't understand that.

His mother had been brushing her hair at the sink and, walking past as he stood, caught sight of what was in the bowl. Her hand shot out to restrain his own from flushing. A miracle, she said, it's a miracle — and called his father. She didn't go to work at the laundry that day. When he got home from school, the line of neighbors and supplicants ran for a block or more along the street, up stairs, and down the hallway to his open door. One by one, as at televised funeral processions, the line advanced as people filed through the two cramped rooms shared by mother, father, brother,

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sister, and Sammy, to the toilet, to have a look. Many crossed themselves. Not a few appealed to the bobbing figure for relief, cessation of pain, succor. Every so often the little Jesus would move in the bowl and there would be sharp intakings of breath.

Soon Sammy had become a frequent guest on local talk shows, within the year a guest on national versions of the same, holding forth on all manner of subjects, northern Ireland, capital punishment, the Israeli stalemate, of which he knew nothing at all. Professors, priests and politicos, vapid interviewers whose perfect teeth were set like jewelry into bright, enthusiastic smiles, simple men of God with lacquered hair — all mused on what Sammy might be considered to be: a messenger, an artist, a devil, a saint. Though everyone knew, the precise occasion for his being here, what he actually *did*, got mentioned only obliquely.

Anchormen and -women never blinked, of course, this being only a storm-tossed version of what had been drilled into them at journalism school: to make tidy small packages, to sketch and color the rude outline of actuality without ever once enclosing the beast itself. Their faces registered concern as they listened to Sammy's supposed confessions. On camera they crossed legs and leaned close, fiddled with Mont Blanc pens between fingers like batons, wands, instruments of thought.

Mother didn't have to go back to work at the laundry. Father bought up block after block of apartment buildings, a scattering of convenience stores previously owned by immigrants, waste-disposal companies. Brother and sister attended the best, most expensive schools. And one day in his own fine home, there among tongue and groove hardwood floors, imported Spanish tile, exquisite bathroom fixtures, Sammy found himself costive — unable to perform, as it were.

He was the best at what he did. Actually, since he was the world's first coprolitist, he was the *only* one who did what he did. But Sammy wanted something *more*.

Meanwhile, he was blocked.

"I have to follow where my talent takes me," he said, "I have to be true to it," as he sat, grunting, "I can't just go on endlessly doing what I already know how to do, what I've done before."

With his absence from the scene, Sammy had become something of a ripe mystery, raw ingredient for the cocktail shakers of media myth.

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WHERE IS SAMMY L? a ten-minute segment of one prime-time show asked, clock ticking ominously in the background. Newsmen with perfect teeth leaned over words such as *angst*, *noblesse oblige*, and *hubris*, bringing them back to life with mouth-to-mouth and sending viewers off in search of long-forgotten dictionaries. T-shirts with Sammy's picture fore and aft began appearing everywhere.

The first of his new issue were malformed, misbegotten things.

"We claim there's freedom, tell ourselves this is the country that gave freedom to the world," Sammy said in a rare interview from this period. "There's no freedom here. As artists we have two choices. Either we plod down roads ordained by those in power, the rich, the yea-sayers, arbiters of taste, style and custom; or we cater to the demands of the great unwashed, trailer-park folk, the lumpen proletariat," sending viewers and research assistants alike again in search of those dictionaries.

Gradually over time Sammy's new creations began to take on a form of their own. At first, like the boulders of Stonehenge and menhirs of Carnac, these forms were rough-hewn, lumpen themselves in fact, more presence than image; and even once realized, were like forms no one had seen before, troubling, disturbing.

By this time, of course, the headlights of media attention had swung elsewhere, found new deer. There was, a few years further along, with *Famous Men*, his exhibit of images of holocaust victims, a brief return to representation and an even briefer rekindling of media interest; then silence. All the things for which an artist labors, depth, control, subtlety, he had attained, but no one would see these.

"Perhaps this is as it should be," Sam Levison said. "We practice our art, if we are serious artists, finally for ourselves alone, *within* ourselves alone."

And so he did, to the point that the *Times*' obituary identified him simply as "Samuel Levison, 48, of Crook Bend near Boston, eccentric, hermit, and performance artist whose work endured its fifteen minutes of fame and passed from view as though with a great sigh of relief."

At least they'd used the word *great*.

In the garage apartment where he spent his last years, nothing was found of whatever new work might have taken up the artist's life in the decades since the fall. Half-hearted rumors sprang up that he'd destroyed

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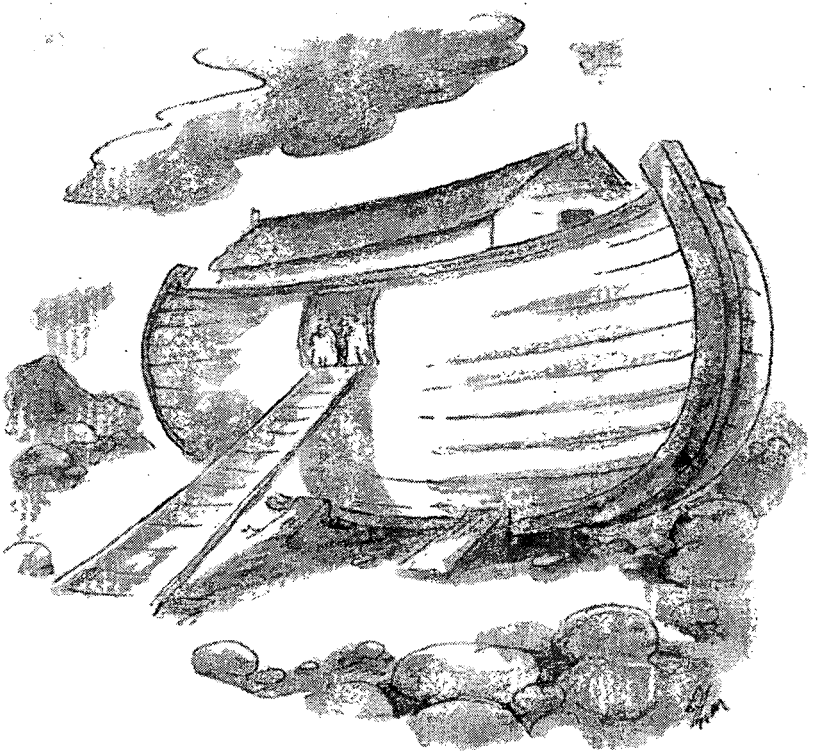
it all, or had pledged his sister to do so. Appropriately enough, Sam offered no last words, only one final creation pushed out as he died. This was, as in the early days, a small Jesus. Sam's landlord, come yet again to try and collect rent, found it there later, as he waited for the ambulance, and picked it up. But its eyes bored into him and would not let him go. After a moment he dropped it back to the floor and crushed it with his foot.



"Go open a can of food and they'll come running."

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Over the past three years, Rod Garcia has delivered several fantasy stories set in the fictional world of Markovy. This new one follows from "Firebird" (which appeared in our May 2001 issue) and picks up the story of Katya and the Bone Witch. But if you missed that earlier tale, you'll have no trouble getting right into the action with this one.

The Bone Witch

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Baron Roy d'Roye

WOODMEN'S AXES RANG between tall straight pine trunks, sounding sharp and clear in the hot summer noontide. Katya could hear the axes even before she smelled the horse droppings, or tasted woodsmoke in the air. Moving cautiously as civilization neared, she slid from tree to tree, stopping now and again to freeze against a mossy pine trunk, whispering the invisibility spell taught her by the Bone Witch. So long as she did not move nor speak, Katya could not be seen.

When visible, Katya was a green-eyed, barefoot witch girl in her teens, with unruly black hair and a wicked smile, wearing a homespun dress with a bright red-orange firebird embroidered on the bodice. Silent as a shadow, she stole softly between the tree trunks, stopping only to disappear. Having lived half her life in the boreal woods, Katya knew every bird cry and animal call, but had only scattered memories of what lay beyond the trees in the land of people — bad memories mostly, making her

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especially wary. She had to cross the settled lands — not their whole length which stretched from Far Barbary to Black Cathay — just the narrow part lying before her, the valley of the Upper Zog leading into the Rift. And she had to get a mounted knight, three horses, and a national treasure across as well — all clearly visible. No easy task, but better than trying to brave the Rift. Axes rang louder as she spotted the first stands of stumps marking a settlement.

"Chi-chi-chi-chi." The red squirrel's high, staccato warning came from downwind. Turning to look and listen, Katya tensed, stiffening into immobility while whispering the Bone Witch's spell. The squirrel's high-pitched chatter was not the man cry; instead it said wolf — which puzzled Katya. What wolf would be silly enough to come within the sound of axes?

Straining her ears, listening for the soft pad of wolves, she heard berry bushes rattle, followed by a hollow clop-clop, growing louder. Ponies, coming from downwind or she would have smelled them. Whoever rode them was headed for the settled lands, just like her, but Katya did not mean to wait and let them catch up — having problems enough already. Turning visible, she slipped off toward the settlement, threading through the stands of stumps, heading for the ring of axes.

Trees parted, and she came on a cleared swath dotted with stumps pointed at a broad blue band of sky — as if a giant scythe had sliced through the boreal forest, felling trees like ripe wheat. Katya froze and vanished, sharing the forest folks' fear of open sky. She had heard of wild rocs that would take her as easily as a hawk hitting a mouse. On the far side of the cleared space she saw a tangled abatis of sharpened stumps and cross-felled trees, rearing high over her head; the settled land's defense against fire, foes, and plague.

"Chi-chi-chi." The red squirrel's wolf cry sounded again, even closer, and she took off, hiking up her skirts and dashing into the cleared space, sprinting toward the tall tangle of trunks and stumps. Any roc that got her had to work quick.

Crossing the cleared space, she went straight up the pile of trunks, climbing with her skirt rolled around her waist — no easy task, since the trunks were tightly interlaced, with their branches trimmed to sharp points. Scrambling up the barricade without so much as tearing her dress, Katya turned at the top, lying down along a log to look back, curious to

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know who was behind her. She had enemies aplenty, and not just wild rocs or leopards lurking in the woods, but two-legged foes more dangerous than a troll-bear. Whispering her spell, she waited, hearing woodsmen's axes in the distance, and warning cries from the far side of the cleared space.

Dire wolves broke cover behind her, big and black with bone-crushing jaws and bright white teeth. She gave thanks to the squirrel for warning her. Coming from downwind, the pack would have been on her before she ever heard them. They shot across the cleared space, straight on her trail, showing they had her scent.

Horsemen came next, nomads carrying tufted lances and mounted on tough shaggy ponies, with short powerful recurve bows tucked into red-leather Cathayan saddles. Tartars. Katya had never seen them before, but she recognized them from the Bone Witch's descriptions. Like Kazaks or Kipchaks they had lacquered armor and terrifying weather-beaten faces — but their curiously shaped caps, Cathayan saddles, and sky-blue trousers marked them as Tartars. And they rode piebald Tartar ponies, stocky big-headed mares with stiff manes, that looked like the horses painted on the cave walls alongside woolly rhinos and sabre-toothed cats. Crossing the clearing, the horsemen reined in when they reached the tree-trunk barricade.

Heart hammering, she lay atop the tall abatis, watching to see what they would do. Katya could not imagine why Tartars would be trailing her — though that did not make them any less her enemies. Tartars could be merciless foes to anyone unlucky enough to cross their tracks, or they could be scrupulously just, even generous, all depending on their needs. Katya was not about to climb down and test these Tartars' intentions. She wore a witch's rune around her neck that protected her from magic, but not from fang and claw, or Tartar arrows.

Spreading out, the riders inspected the base of the barricade, probing the sharp tangle with tufted lances. Their trained wolves ran back and forth a bit, casting for her scent, then clumped right below Katya and began howling at her, smelling what they could not see. Katya held her breath, fearing the wolves would come climbing up the tree trunks after her. Attracted by the commotion, the Tartars trotted over, scanning the top of the abatis and peering between the trunks. Seeing nothing, they talked for a bit in their unintelligible tongue, then turned and followed the

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line of the barricade northward, calling their wolves to heel. After a moment's hesitation, the pack took off after them.

Breathing out, Katya broke her spell, sliding back along the log, then climbing down the far side of the abatis, happy to have it between her and the Tartars. And their wolves. She had no idea what Tartars were doing on this side of the Iron Wood, but it would not be anything good. Beyond the barricade the pine forest thinned, broken by stump stands and leafy groves of second-growth beeches and poplars. Slipping swiftly away from the abatis, she ran right into the big rough hands of a woodcutter.

"Where did you come from?" the woodsman demanded, looking big as a haystack, with a sooty straw-colored beard, and wearing a smoke-stained smock over loose trousers roped at the waist. He stank of sweat and onions, and his right ear was missing, cut off for failing to heed his boyar. Felons were taken naked into the woods and nailed by the ear to a tree, then left with a knife to cut themselves free, carrying out the sentence themselves. Had she not been fleeing dire wolves she never would have blundered into something so huge and smelly, and half deaf. He demanded again, "Where are you from?"

"A convent." Lying instinctively, Katya picked the safest, most irreproachable place imaginable. "The Sisterhood of Perpetual Suffering, by the shores of the White Sea."

"Your head is not shaved." Rightly suspicious, the woodsman would not let go of her. His free hand held the peasant's all-purpose axe, able to frame a cottage or carve a spoon — the only weapon a serf could own. "Who ever heard of a long-haired nun?"

"Not a nun," she scoffed at the woodsman's ignorance, "a novice only, on my way to take holy orders. If you will pray let me on my way, the nuns will not like the delay...."

"But the White Sea lies hundreds of leagues away." The interfering woodsman did not swallow her tale of a nonexistent nunnery.

"That is why I must hurry," she insisted. How could he stand in the way of her becoming a nun? What would the Sisters of Suffering say?

Keeping a tight grip on her, he cocked his head to listen. "I heard wolves just now. What are you doing here?"

"Visiting my poor mother." Katya had no mother, rich or poor, but she would cheerfully invent a whole family to satisfy this big busybody. "I

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cannot become a nun without Mother's permission. But now that I have it, nothing needs keep me...."

"Your mother lives in the wild woods?" His head was still cocked, listening for sounds from beyond the abatis.

"Lives in the woods?" She scoffed at that foolish thought. "Of course not — but this is mushroom season. Mother is a humble mushroom picker. I come from a family of pious fungus gatherers."

"Who is her lord?" the woodsman demanded. "Who is yours?"

"As I said, the Sisters of Perpetual Servility."

"You said suffering before." He continued to eye her suspiciously.

"Same thing. Servility. Suffering." Any serf should see that — but this one snorted, and dragged Katya off toward the sound of the axes. Unable to vanish, she had to stumble along behind the huge woodsman, trying to avoid being clipped by his steel axe. Sooty hands left sweaty black marks on her skin.

Ahead of her, two dozen sweating serfs were busy felling a tall stand of pines, sending one of the biggest crashing down as she arrived. With a cheer, the serfs swarmed over the forest titan, trimming off branches with axes and attacking the fallen trunk with giant two-handed saws. Her captor called to his fellows, "Look what I found in the forest." Katya had come hoping to look without being seen, and now she was captured by the town crier.

"What is it?" Grimy-faced men called down from atop the log, "A wayward nymph? A wood sprite?"

"A new young wife?" one suggested, leaning on his huge saw.

"What will your old one say?" asked an axeman.

"Good riddance." They all laughed good-naturedly, looking her over and smiling, glad to have an excuse to take a break and gawk at a helpless girl. She told her story again, including her imaginary mother and her invented nunnery. None of them were much impressed. "See her green eyes. She's a witch girl."

"No I am not," Katya lied. "I am going to be a nun." By now she almost believed it.

"Or a Tartar spy," someone suggested. "Tartars were seen lurking in the woods."

Her captor glanced back toward the tall trees. "I saw no Tartars, but I heard wolves howl beyond the abatis."

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"Maybe she is a werewolf." No one saw her as a nun.

"Whatever she is, the bailiff needs to see her," Katya's captor concluded. His fellows agreed, and having decided her fate, went cheerfully back to work. But her captor had found his way out of woodcutting, and dragged her down the footpath toward town, past fat docile animals that would not last a day in the woods, grazing on stubble or pecking at sooty garbage. Like most forest villages, Diymgorat had a single wooden plank street, this one leading from a dock on the Upper Zog to the great intricately carved church that dominated the town's log huts and lean-tos. Diymgorat meant Smoketown, and the village lived under a black pall from the charcoal burning and ironworks upriver. Summer air tasted of soot and iron, and children's smiles shone against black smudged cheeks. Even the tall wooden church, with its wide gables, carved birds, and troll faces, had a layer of dark ash on its onion dome.

Her captor sat her down on a log beside the bailiff's leather door, telling Katya, "Do not move." Then he called for the bailiff. When the bailiff came to the door, the woodsman pointed to where she sat and swore. Katya was gone.

Sitting still and invisible, staring into the street, she saw civilization go lurching by — finding it about as bad as she remembered. Soot-black charcoal burners sloshed through the mud, making for an open vat of beer set up before a lean-to tavern, where iron workers stood drinking with serf women wearing lilac kerchiefs, ruddy-faced from bathing naked in the Zog. Some of the men had pawned coats and trousers for beer; several were passed out bare-assed in the mud. Katya listened to the woodsman swear she had just been right here, telling the bored bailiff all the theories about her, from wood sprite to Tartar spy, making no mention of her brief career as a novice nun.

Men at the beer tub toasted the death of the Bone Witch, whom they had held in great fear. Then they drank to "His Highness the brave and lordly Prince Sergey, who killed the gruesome witch in her white bone lair."

Murdered was the word, but Katya did not say it, sitting still and unnoticed, hidden by the Bone Witch's spell. She had seen the Bone Witch die, and been unimpressed with Prince Sergey's courage — it had taken a half dozen lances of the royal Horse Guards to kill an unarmed old woman. And still the Bone Witch got the better of them.

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"Hail, brave Prince Sergey, who earned his seat in Heaven." Serfs heartily toasted that lie, then praised the saints, damned Satan, and swore death to the Tartars. Lying did not bother Katya — a well-told lie always satisfied, while the truth just aroused suspicion — but she envied the beer swilling, being thirsty and seated in the sun. Crossing the settled lands would be as hard as Katya had imagined. She had barely taken two steps before getting grabbed, dragged into town, and stranded on the doorstep of the local law. She would almost rather be in the Rift. How would she get through the settlements and across the Upper Zog with her noisy knight and horses? It would be hard enough getting off this bailiff's doorstep and back to the woods.

Bells tolled in the tall wooden church, as the great carved churchyard gates swung wide. Out trotted a column of armored riders in Horse Guards blue-and-white, with black pennants hung on their lances, followed by white-robed priests swinging smoking censers. Behind the chanting priests lurched a gold-draped funeral carriage, with a lord's charger trailing behind, his silver-studded saddle empty. Riding after the war horse was Prince Sergey's personal butler holding the prince's banner, bearing the lightning stroke of Ikstra. Katya knew that butler, and the butler knew her — yet another reason to stay invisible. Behind the butler came the local boyar, Baron Boris of Zazog, a well-fed warrior aboard a gray charger, wearing blackened armor beneath a green silk surcoat. After the boyar came mounted retainers in Zazog black and green.

Serfs fell to their knees around her, abasing themselves before the local boyar and Prince Sergey's funeral cortege. Sensing the moment for a speech, Baron Boris rode forward to address his awed inferiors kneeling in the mud. Rising in the saddle, he shouted over bent heads, "Be penitent, be humbled, the Prince who defeated the Bone Witch was brought low by a leopard, felled in his hour of triumph. Called to join the Almighty." This had only a passing relation to the truth, but Katya was not tempted to leap up and correct him.

Baron Boris let his lie sink in, then went on in shocked tones, "Alas, not everyone has your pious simple-minded devotion. Foreign traitors mean to profit from Markovy's misfortune. At the very moment that our beloved Prince Sergey was struck down by a leopard, the dastardly Castellan of Byeli Zamak, Sir Roy d'Roye, so-called baron of France,

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betrayed our trust and stole the sacred Firebird's Egg — rightly belonging to the kings of Markovy. Whosoever sees this foreign devil must report him at once, or share in his evil deed, and burn beside him."

Bad as that sounded, Baron Boris added, "This vile heretic has an accomplice, a godless witch girl with dark hair and green eyes, who escaped with this false knight into the forest...."

That brought up heads all around her. Diymgorat's bailiff hastily announced that such a girl was seen that very morning. Her woodcutter captor told how he had hauled her out of the woods and into town. Several drunken serfs spoke up as well, saying they saw the girl the woodcutter dragged in from the forest.

Delighted to hear they almost had her, Baron Boris ordered the serfs to search their log hovels and tiny gardens at once. Serfs rushed to obey their boyar while the object of their search sat and watched. Katya could not believe the commotion around her, and could not guess how she would get out of it. Her throat was parched and she could not sit forever in the heat, watching people down beer and search for her. Trying to take her mind off her thirst, she thought of her knight, hoping he had stayed where she left him. He was indeed a foreigner, and likely to get lost without warning. Several half-starved dogs came up to her, sniffing suspiciously, but that was the closest they came to finding her.

Dejected serfs returned to fall facedown in the mud before the boyar's stirrup, confessing failure. Rising higher in his saddle, their master sternly admonished them, "Wretched worthless oafs, the witch girl was here this morning — find her and bring her to me. Until then all hearths are extinguished. You shall eat your meals cold, and wash in cold water. And find me the Castellan of Byeli Zamak. Witches and heretics must not have the Firebird's Egg. Burn no fires. Bake no bread. Brew no porridge until you bring them to me."

Here the Prince's butler spoke up saying he had seen the fabulous Firebird's Egg, holding it in his hands, "I felt the Firebird Egg's living warmth. The Egg is no legend, it is the hope of Markovy, and the luck of her kings; it must not fall into foreign hands."

Groveling in the mud, grateful serfs blessed the baron's lenience, kissing his boot, swearing on their base souls to do better, vowing not to eat or sleep until they had obeyed their boyar. Baron Boris cheerfully

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promised real punishments if they failed, then signaled for the funeral cortege to proceed. Horse Guards escorted the gold-draped wagon toward the river dock, where a barge waited to take the body down the Zog to the Dys, which would bear it to Ikstra and the family crypt. Glad to see the last of Prince Sergey, Katya did not follow the funeral's progress, since turning her head would have made her instantly visible. Instead she waited like a bird in hiding, hoping the street would empty out, and she could somehow get away.

Bit by bit, the street did empty. Baron Boris's retainers closed down the log tavern, sending the clientele staggering off. Women came out to bemoan the boyar's ban on fires, asking how they were supposed to cook and wash, telling their men to scour the woods for her, "or there will be no porridge tonight, and cold beer for breakfast tomorrow." By and large the men obeyed, trooping off into the woods, leaving only some women behind, industriously using up the last of the hot water to wash themselves, and their clothes, letting their bare bodies dry in the hot summer sun.

As people returned to their hovels, a two-wheeled wagon came jolting along, headed for the forest road, carrying a butt of beer and a bag of bread. Seeing no one looking her way, Katya braced herself. When the cart came between her and the women, she jumped up and leaped aboard, dropping down between the beer butt and the wagon's side. Freezing again, she whispered her spell. Looking straight back over the wagon bed, she saw a big woman in a berry-dyed skirt come running out of the bailiff's log house, followed by a pair of wide-eyed naked toddlers. Shouting and waving, the woman called after the wagon, but the driver did not even slow.

More women joined the chase, some throwing down their washing and picking up their skirts, others dashing naked after the wagon, trailing yapping dogs and grimy children. Quickly catching up with the disinterested driver, they demanded he stop, yelling that, "The bailiff's wife saw that witch girl leap onto your wagon."

Unable to see the driver's reaction, Katya stayed stock-still, staring out the back of the wagon at the ring of women's faces. All of them looked worried and tired, some outright fearful, wanting to satisfy their boyar before he devised new torments. Hard to blame them, but she was not

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about to leap up and turn herself in. She heard the driver's seat creak as he looked about, then announced blandly, "There is nothing there but bread and beer. Go back to your babies."

"She must have jumped out," the bailiff's wife declared. "Did you see which way she went?"

"I saw nothing at all," the driver insisted, proudly proclaiming his ignorance. "Absolutely nothing."

"Useless fool," the bailiff's wife shouted at his back as the wagon ambled away. Katya watched the women disperse, and saw Diymgorat's single wooden street disappear as greenery closed in. Ahead she again heard the ring of axes. Breaking the spell, she looked to see it was safe, then reached into the bread bag and took two braided loaves. Sliding back the top of the beer barrel, she took a deep drink that went straight to her head, making it swim in the heat. Another drink and her problems did not seem so bad. This cart would take her back into the woods, where she had nothing to fear but wolves and Tartars — then she would find her knight and devise some scheme for crossing the settled lands, or so she hoped.

Without warning, the wagon jolted to a stop, and Katya just had time to replace the top on the beer, before shrinking back into a corner to disappear. Men jumped aboard the bed of the wagon, big sooty charcoal burners, wearing smudged smocks and blackened leggings. Tossing the bread bag down to the ground, they wrestled the beer out of the wagon, nearly squashing her with the barrel. Then to her horror, they began heaving big balks of wood into the wagon. Here was where she had to get off.

Leaping over the wagon rail, Katya nearly landed atop a surprised charcoal burner, who gave a startled cry and dropped his chunk of timber on a black bare toe, producing an astonished oath. Hitting the ground running, she shot off, holding her skirt about her waist, with the bread loaves tucked inside. Shouts rang out behind her, followed by curses and running feet. Dodging between stands of stumps and leafy second-growth trees, she heard heavy footsteps gaining on her.

Dropping down behind a stump, she disappeared. Frozen in place, she watched the charcoal burners go charging past, rattling the brush with their bulk. She kept to her crouch, hands pressed to the ground, feeling

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their huge footsteps fading. But by now Diymgorat had awoken to the uproar with church bells ringing and dogs yapping. Worse yet, the tall log barricade loomed ahead of her. She could never climb the spiked abatis and cross the cleared space beyond without getting caught, not with dogs and woodsmen at her heels. Her only chance was to head upriver toward the Rift, hoping for a break in the barricade.

She set out running, drawing more shouts from downriver. Ground rose up ahead of her, forming a sheer amphitheater of steep hills crowned with dark pines. To her right the forest barricade curved to meet the base of the hills, and to her left lay the smoky ironworks lining the Upper Zog. There was a single sharp notch in the hills, where the Zog broke through the frowning heights, cutting a steep-sided cleft leading up to the Rift. Unless she found a gap in the barricade, her only escape would be up that narrow canyon.

Hearing dogs getting closer, she redoubled her efforts, knowing her favorite trick of running and vanishing would not work with dogs. Dogs would track her by scent, and be all over her, forcing her to move and be seen. Finding no gap in the barricade, she looked hastily behind her, seeing her pursuers gaining fast.

"Katea-katea-katea," Katya heard the firebird call her name. Looking to her left, she saw the little flame-colored jay flitting between the birches, heading toward the notch in the hills, calling for her to follow, "Katea-katea...."

She instantly obeyed the bird, breaking left, crashing through the birch thicket, heading for the steep slope at the opening of the canyon. This flame jay was the only bird that called to her by name, and so far he had never betrayed her. Bursting out of the birch thicket, she heard the roar of rapids ahead, where the swift-running Zog tumbled out of the Rift, cutting a cleft in the hills, and powering trip hammers in the iron mills below. She hated to be heading into the Rift, a place she had wanted to avoid completely. Bad as the settled lands might be, she feared the Rift even more. Much more. But now she had no choice.

"Katea-katea," the bird called back to her. Scrambling over rocks and gravel, she scanned the steep ravine ahead. Sheer walls rose up on one side of her, and on the other a vertical cliff dropped straight down to the roaring river, hundreds of feet below. Winding between the cliff edge and the

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canyon walls was a narrow trail, no more than a dozen yards across. She started up it, desperate to stay ahead of the men and dogs, even if it meant braving the Rift.

She did not get far. Blocking the narrowest part of the trail was a tight knot of thick-armed men in stained leather, blacksmiths from the iron works holding their huge hammers, some wearing slit-eyed welding masks. Her heart sank. Woodsmen, dogs, and charcoal burners were crashing through the birches behind her, and brawny iron workers blocked the way ahead — warned by the church bells that something was amiss below. Several of them saw her, shouting and pointing.

Moments like this made Katya wish she could really disappear. Sinking to her knees, she wanted to just lie down and cry, unable to believe the firebird had betrayed her; despite being a notorious trickster, mimic, and nest robber, the flame-colored jay had never played her false before. How utterly unfair. What had she done? She was not hurting anyone, or taking anything. She only wanted to cross the little valley and go on her way. Why would they not leave her alone?

Being down on her knees, she did not see the armored rider until he burst in among the blacksmiths, wearing Horse Guards blue-and-white over steel plate, and whirling a great jagged war hammer, shouting a hearty, *"Bonjour!"*

Terrified blacksmiths broke and ran, taken from behind by a mounted madman. Big blunt welding hammers were no match for his Lucerne hammer, a four-foot shaft with a steel head that had a hook on one side and three wicked curved blades on the other, made to inflict ghastly jagged wounds. None of the iron workers waited to test it.

Leaping up, she threw herself against the canyon wall, clinging to the rock and vanishing. Blacksmiths galloped past, tossing aside their heavy hammers and bellowing in fright; their serfs' instinctive fear of trained men-at-arms making them helpless against an armored horseman. Behind them came the mounted knight, swinging his gruesome hammer to shoo them along — not trying to kill, just encouraging their flight. "Katea-katea." The firebird flew in triumphant circles, happy with the havoc he helped create.

Reining in not far from her, the knight in Horse Guard colors sat easily atop his gray charger, his Lucerne hammer swinging idly at his side. He

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pushed back the visor on his crested helmet, revealing a handsome clean-shaven face and fashionable bowl-cut bangs. Smiling, he called out, "*Mademoiselle*, I know you must be here somewhere."

She stepped happily away from the rock wall, glad to see her knight had not stayed on the hilltop where she left him, and had in fact come looking for her. "How did you find me?"

"*Mon Dieu*, how could I not?" He extended a steel-clad arm to her. "The whole valley is an uproar, with bells ringing and dogs barking. And birds making a horrible racket — including this persistent jay, who absolutely insisted I come take a look. When I saw the ironsmiths blocking the pass, I decided to ride around and see why."

Seizing his hard mail wrist, she felt his gloved hand close on her bare forearm. Whenever they touched was special, but this time more than ever. After her exhausting chase and helpless terror, his firm gloved fingers felt tremendously reassuring — sending shivers all through her, even though it was not flesh-to-flesh. Scrambling up onto his charger's leather-armored crupper, she looped her arms about his steel waist, hugging his strong body to her, laying her head against his armored back. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you so very much."

"You are most welcome, *Mademoiselle*." He could not turn to look at her because of his helmet, but she could hear the smile in his voice. "Pray see if our gentlemen friends are returning."

She laughed and shook her head. "Do not worry. They will not stop running until they get to Diymgorat."

Into the Rift

HUGGING HER knight's hard armored sides, Katya rested her head on his steel back, exhausted but happy, feeling the comforting sway of the horse beneath her. Safe again. She had hardly ever felt safe since the day the Bone Witch died; and when she did, it was almost always with her knight, who was smart, gallant, and a French baron to boot — Sir Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile, et le Baron d'Roye. He treated her nonchalantly, calling her "*Mademoiselle*," but she could tell he loved her, even if he was shy about showing it.

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"Where are we going?" she asked, glad to leave that grimy settlement behind, but wary of going deeper into the Rift.

"To where I left the horses." He turned his gray charger up a side canyon carved by a swift streamlet descending the pine hills bordering the Rift. The firebird flew ahead of them, calling raucously, making for the stunted pines above.

When they got to where the horses were tethered the flame jay was sitting on the palfrey's pack saddle preening his red-orange plumage. From the hilltop Katya got a sweeping view of the valley below, flanked on the east by the forest barricade, with the Upper Zog winding through the steep canyon, then flowing past smoking ironworks and the tiny village of Diymgorat, headed for the flatlands and the river Dys. No wonder her knight found her so easily, since the hill looked straight down on the trail where the blacksmiths had stood. Behind her the hills rose even higher, and the canyon widened, merging with the Rift. Somewhere up there was the Iron Wood and beyond that, Burning Mountain, where they needed to go.

Dismounting, she helped her knight down, then offered him braided bread, being ravenously hungry herself — not having eaten since dawn. She did not like to sneak on a full stomach, which dulled her senses; but she was done with sneaking through the valley below — too many dogs and people. "Much too difficult," she decided.

"What is too difficult, *Mademoiselle*?" asked her knight, doffing his helmet and accepting the bread.

She sighed and sat down on soft pine needles, taking a bite of bread, savoring the fresh warm taste. "Trying to make it through the settled lands without being seen — it is impossible. I thought they would be stupid and unsuspecting, but there is a boyar down there setting the serfs to search for us. As well as what is left of Prince Sergey's Horse Guards."

"Which boyar?" Baron d'Roye asked, working his words around a mouthful of bread.

She shrugged, the only noble Katya cared about being the one sitting next to her. "A big one in green silk and black armor."

"Baron Boris of Zazog," d'Roye declared between bites. "He betrayed Byeli Zamak to Prince Sergey." Before meeting her, Baron d'Roye had been Castellan of Byeli Zamak, the White Castle, holding it for the infant

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Prince Ivan — until Prince Sergey sacked Byeli Zamak, searching for the Firebird's Egg. "Baron Boris is arrogant, treacherous, and brutal, his taste in wine is vile, and he never uses a fork except to pick his teeth."

Katya had never even seen a fork, but took her knight at his word. "And Tartars as well."

He looked at her quizzically. "As in steak tartare?"

"Tartars from Black Cathay, with wicked bows and worse-looking wolves." She shivered at the thought of them. "They nearly got me."

Having taken off his gloves to eat, d'Roye reached over and touched her cheek, sending another sort of shiver through her. "*Mademoiselle* is scared?"

"Terrified, actually." Tartars scared her more than all the boyars in Markovy, but that hardly mattered at the moment. Turning her head, she softly kissed his hand.

Baron d'Roye grinned. "*Mademoiselle* is the bravest lady I have ever met."

Sometimes. Right now she felt incredibly nervous, just sitting and sharing braided bread with her knight. Now that they were alone and relatively safe, depraved ideas danced through her head. Everyone knew women were silly sinful creatures, morally void and naturally promiscuous, best kept under lock and key, while being a soulless witch girl made Katya more wanton that most. Boyars kept their wives and daughters in harems and convents, making it more likely to see a unicorn than a noblewoman on the loose. Serfs could not afford such luxuries, and their wives drank and bathed with men, their innate wantonness kept in check by the husband's whip hand. Markovite marriage custom required the bride to kneel and kiss the groom's dog whip, begging him to use it on her whenever she strayed — one of the reasons why Katya was in no rush to marry.

But her knight was a foreigner, full of foolish chivalry and silly delusions of feminine purity. Aside from a few chaste kisses, he treated her like a little sister, or niece, totally ignoring her incorrigible depravity. Until she saw him bathing and shaving, she had thought he was a eunuch. Now she knew he was "protecting" her from his own base male instincts. Charming, though absurd.

"We will have to go through the Rift," she warned him. "Which

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frightens me a lot. But if we cannot get through the settled lands, that is the only way to the Firebird's Nest."

His hand went from her cheek to her shoulder, then slid down her arm coming to rest on her hip — the first time he had ever let himself be familiar. "What is so bad about the Rift?"

"Everything." She shuddered at the horrors of the Rift, glad to have his firm comforting hand on her hip. "Troll-bear lairs, ghosts, ghouls and lycanthropes, renegades and outlaws. Wild rocs and nine-foot cobras that can spit venom in your eye. And were-leopards; not the nice ones either." And the Rift had no trees, not even metal ones, no overhead cover at all.

"What about witch girls?" He was not taking the terrors of the Rift seriously, using his hand to bring them closer. "Would pretty witch girls go into the Rift?"

"Apparently." She let him pull her nearer, her heart hammering harder than when she lay atop the barricade looking down on Tartars. "Though any witch girl with a whit of sense ought to know better."

"Then I will go as well." He meant it. She had seen him cheerfully take on two armed men and a werewolf — all at the same time, and all for her. "For I would be with you, whatever the danger." Leaning closer still, he kissed her, letting their lips linger, not at all the way he would kiss a niece, or even a cousin. The hand on her hip squeezed harder, and he whispered, "Let me show you how the French do it."

His free hand cupped her head, and he kissed her again, deeper and more passionately, doing surprising things with his tongue. Unbelievably thrilling, but all they did was kiss, his other hand never left her hip. When he was done, he asked, "Do you like it?"

"Very much." Katya had seen drunken serfs lying with their mouths together, never suspecting this gross act was the most thrilling thing on Earth. And her heart told her this was just the beginning. Her knight smelled of sweat and leather mixed with the man-smell that all sane forest creatures knew and feared, but she alone found incredibly compelling. Luckily a couple of layers of armor lay between them, otherwise there would have been no stopping her. She asked shyly, "Have you known many women?"

D'Roye looked taken aback. "Some few. I am French, after all."

"Are you married?" Horrible thought.

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"Somewhat." That question made him even less comfortable.

"What do you mean?" It never occurred to her that her knight might have a wife — or a family. Showing how new she was to this.

"My parents betrothed me as a boy," d'Roye confessed, "to an heiress whose lands adjoined ours. We were married when I turned twenty — but that was all long ago and far away."

"Is she dead?" Katya asked hopefully.

"*Mon Dieu*, no!" d'Roye hastily crossed himself. "Her name is Marie, and she is quite well, thank heaven. But when I was exiled, she moved back in with her parents. Last I heard she was having the marriage annulled."

"Did you love her?" This was the question she feared most, but had to ask.

"Absolutely not." He looked aghast at the notion. "She is pious and arrogant as the pox, with a mean pinched face and a fondness for flagellation, keeping a bullwhip in the bedroom for intimate moments. Marie would have made a perfect wife for Baron Boris — but we disliked each other even as children. Still our lands matched, and marriage is mainly business; for love you must look elsewhere."

"Any children?" Marriage did not sound much like she imagined.

"No, not by me anyway." He heaved a rueful sigh. "Marriage killed what little attraction we could muster."

"Good!" Katya kissed him happily. "Annulled, or not, the marriage is meaningless."

"How so?" He sounded intrigued.

"All marriages performed by schismatics on foreign heretics are meaningless." According to Mother Church, everyone outside of Markovy was living in sin, and all their children bastards.

D'Roye sounded doubtful. "His holiness Pope Pious might disagree."

"Only because he is a heretic too," she pointed out. Markovite Patriarchs and Roman Popes had lived under mutual excommunication since the tenth century. "He is the antipope, a lying celibate schismatic doomed to burn in hell for his sins — what would he know about true marriage?"

Baron Roy d'Roye laughed, giving her hip another squeeze. "Fear not, *Mademoiselle*, however many women I have been with, married, maiden,

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or crone — none were the least like you. You are unique, utterly and completely special."

That sounded much better, as if all the other women merely prepared him for her. "How am I special?"

He looked her over carefully. "You are the first female of any sort that I ever saw disappear — unless you count visitations by the Virgin."

She pooh-poohed the miracle of invisibility. "That is nothing, just a spell the Bone Witch taught me when I was ten."

Baron d'Roye smiled at her natural modesty, saying, "You found me wounded and friendless in the woods, with a hefty reward on my head — and you have been feeding and caring for me ever since, without a thought for yourself, or what you might make by turning me in to my enemies. Never have I known anyone so cunning and resourceful, and so artlessly caring." He kissed her again, deftly guiding her lips to his with one hand, making her feel her youthful awkwardness was incredibly precious, a treasure to be cherished, as magical as the Firebird's Egg.

When she came back to Earth, Katya looked about shyly. No one was coming up the trail, but it was dangerous to tarry too long. She whispered to her knight, "Wonderful as this is, we must be gone. Word of where we are headed will get downriver, and we must go deeper into the Rift to stay ahead of pursuit."

Baron d'Roye acceded to her forest expertise, helping her mount her black mare. Handing her the lead rope for the big bay palfrey that served as a sumpter horse, he added, "And what other wood nymph would criticize the pope on morals and theology?"

Leading his charger to a sandy spot by the streambed, he knelt and dug down with his big double-edged saxe knife. Setting aside the knife, he dug the last few inches with his hands, then reached in and withdrew the Firebird's Egg, wrapped in an embroidered tapestry — all that remained of the legendary firebirds, giant flying guardians of Markovy. King Demitri took the Egg from the Nest atop Burning Mountain, making it his talisman, letting him defeat the Poles, Kipchacks, and rebellious boyars, putting an end to the Time of Troubles, and restoring the Mikhailovich dynasty to the throne. For decades the Egg had lain in the vaults of Byeli Zamak, until Baron Boris betrayed the castle to Prince Sergey — forcing the castle's commander to flee into the forest with this prize, where he

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met Katya. And every day since d'Roye took it from the cold castle vaults, the Egg's leathery skin had grown warmer and livelier, pulsing like a hard round heart.

She led the sumpter horse over, and d'Roye slid the precious Egg into the bay's packsaddle. This was the quest put on them by the Bone Witch, to return the Firebird's Egg to its nest atop Burning Mountain. Baron Boris was only half right, the Egg was the luck of the Markovite kings, but it was their curse as well. As long as King Demitri had the Egg, he had never been defeated in battle — but otherwise things had been dismal; King Demitri lost his wife and all but one of his children before dying and leaving his infant son Ivan ruling over a nation on the brink of civil war. According to the Bone Witch, Markovy's sole hope was to return the Egg to the Nest. And only that absolute need to get to Burning Mountain could tempt Katya into the Rift — one of Earth's truly terrible places.

Descending the steep streambed, they worked their way along the cliff-side trail overlooking the deep canyon of the Upper Zog. Spotting pony droppings, she reined in and dismounted, kneeling over the horse turds, sniffing and poking them, finding them fresh and moist — not a good sign. Picking up the largest, she broke it apart with her hands, then showed her find to d'Roye. "Horse nomads came through here this morning, maybe the same Tartars I saw by the forest barricade."

"How can you tell?" asked d'Roye, wrinkling his nose — clearly unaccustomed to reading feces.

"Here, see these grains among the grass." She sorted through the broken dropping. "That is millet. Boyar's horses are fed on barley. And here is a rice grain — we do not eat such things."

"Happy to hear it," her knight declared. "I myself pass up anything found in horse droppings."

"It could be from Kazaks or Kipchaks," she added hopefully, "but I doubt it." That stray kernel most likely meant some Tartar had given his favored mare a rice ball reward. She held up the pony turd for her knight's inspection. "See how it is still warm at the center."

He swore he would take her word for it. Brushing off her hands, she washed them in a little stream tumbling down the rocks toward the Zog; then they set out again, heading deeper into the Rift, feeling a warm wind spring up out of nowhere, blowing slow but steady at her back. Letting her

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black mare watch the trail, she kept looking over her shoulder at the sheer cliff face above. Aside from the rushing river far below, everything was silent and still. Too still. Here she did not have the wood's hundreds of eyes watching over her. Troll-bears you could smell, but were-leopards and lycanthropes could be stalking silently through the rocks above, waiting to catch them unawares.

At the head of the canyon, the Rift widened and flattened out, and the Upper Zog sank to a trickle in a big sandy bed dotted with boulders. There they saw the first sign of how terrible a place they were entering. Lying in the middle of the trail was a woman's head, whose owner had been pretty, with long blonde braids and good teeth; but there was a black bruise under one eye, and the head had been in the sun for some time. Long lines of ants stretched away from the mouth and nostrils.

Her knight was aghast and started to get down, but she stopped him. This was just the sort of spot a lycanthrope would pick to await the unwary. He told her, "I was only going to give her a decent burial. She was young and fair, and I cannot just leave her head to the ants."

"She is buried," Katya explained, ignoring the head, looking up at the boulders instead. "There is a body attached to that head. Being buried to the neck and left to die is the penalty for killing your husband." Yet another reason not to wed.

"But we must at least bury her the rest of the way," he insisted; so she stood watch while her knight heaped sand onto the head, covering the mound with rocks. Then they set out again, over sand and grit that gave way to hard flat shale as the Rift widened, its steep walls sinking down to bare white bluffs. After a time, d'Roye asked, "What if a man kills his wife?"

"You mean like if he beats her to death?" She relaxed, glad to see frowning cliffs replaced by clear open views. Anything could be lurking at the base of the bluffs, but they were safe for the moment. "He gets a new one."

Her knight looked back toward where he had buried the head. "Hardly seems fair."

"But only up to three," she warned, least he think men could do anything in Markovy. "Mother Church allows a man only three marriages. Any man who whips two wives to death must be careful with his third."

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"Or do his own washing." D'Roye said he could see the wisdom of setting a definite limit.

"Do they do things differently in France?" she asked, eyeing the ground ahead for sign of trouble.

"Somewhat," her knight admitted, still sounding shaken by what he had seen.

She was shaken but not surprised. Being unhallowed ground, the Rift was where the law did its worst deeds. "What happens in France if a wife kills her husband?

"We burn her alive." D'Roye had thought that penalty harsh until he came to Markovy.

"How much more civilized," Katya exclaimed. "We are, alas, a very backward people, only burning witches and Catholics."

"Sensible policy," d'Roye declared, being a Catholic in love with a witch-girl.

"So if we married, you would not beat me?" Strange customs might prove useful.

"I am married to someone else," he reminded her, "a baroness in France named Marie d'Roye."

"Only according to the pope," she protested. "And what would he know?"

"What indeed," d'Roye agreed. "If I refused to flog my unloving wife for fun; why should I beat you?"

"How would you ever hope to control me?" Katya considered herself a handful, being wanton, willful, and raised by a witch.

D'Roye laughed, saying, "I would have scant hope of that. *Mademoiselle* is a wild wood nymph, who will never be tamed." He looked her over with a grin. "Except, perhaps by love." She smiled back at her knight, who risked his life to bury dead strangers, but would not touch a pony turd.

A black line appeared on the bluffs ahead, growing thicker and blacker as they proceeded. D'Roye asked, "What is that?"

She wondered at his innocence. Her knight, who knew so much about kissing and killing, was naive about the simplest things. "That is the Iron Wood."

"Truly?" He rose in his saddle, scanning the bluffs. "I have never actually seen it, even from this distance."

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"It is closer than you think." She pointed out a dark patch growing nearby, slim black saplings topped by curled iron leaves, looking like fireplace pokers stuck in the sand. "The Rift has only a sprinkling of iron trees, and is heavily logged to supply the ironworks on the Zog. See those stalks chiseled off at the base?" Little black stubs dotted the ground around the stand of saplings.

Her knight nodded, staring past the black patch at the huge metal forest covering the bluffs. "Why does the Iron Wood not grow into the Rift?"

She shrugged, "No one knows why it grows at all." Nothing grew well in the Rift, and the bareness frightened Katya — with no berries to pick, nor game to hunt, food would soon be a problem. The Rift felt like a giant funnel flanked on both sides by the Iron Wood, narrowing as they went deeper; reminding Katya of a carnivorous plant the Bone Witch used to have in her hut. Flies would crawl down the tall funnel-shaped stalk, drawn by the smell of nectar, then fall into the sticky trap below — she used to hear them buzzing angrily inside the stalk, until they drowned in nectar and were digested by the plant.

"Katea, katea," the firebird called out a warning, and Katya looked around, seeing nothing.

"Look, up there," her knight pointed a gloved finger at the wide open sky. She looked up, expecting to see a wild roc diving down at her; instead a dark object drifted overhead, a big black inflated parasail, with a ship-shaped hull hanging beneath it, a Tartar sky-boat.

"Something else I have heard of but never seen." D'Roye sat in the saddle, staring up at the sky-boat, watching it slowly catch up with them. "What propels it?"

"Wind and magic," she replied, wishing it had been a wild roc. "Light gas in the sail keeps the flying ship aloft, and Tartar shamans are wizards at calling up the right wind." Which explained the warm gentle breeze blowing at their backs — it sent the sky-boat drifting ahead of them, sinking steadily lower throughout the afternoon. Finally the wind died and the sky-boat sank down, disappearing between the iron-bound bluffs ahead. Dismounting, they dined on braided bread, and some pickled meat given to them by the Bone Witch. She told her knight, "I should go on ahead, to see what the Tartars are doing."

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"We should both go," d'Roye suggested, loath to see her leave on her own.

She shook her head. "They know we are coming, and will be lying in wait. It will be hard enough for me to get close. With you and the horses there will be no chance at all." She hated being so blunt, but this was life or death.

"Am I so useless?" asked Baron d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile, and former Castellan of Byeli Zamak.

"No, no," she assured her injured knight. "This very morning you saved me from dogs, woodsmen, and iron workers. I would not be here but for you." Katya meant it with all her heart, but right now she needed to see what these Tartars were up to, and hopefully steal some food. She could not cater to knightly honor. "And you must guard the Egg while I am gone."

"Ah, yes, the Egg. The fabulous Firebird's Egg." From the way he said it, she could tell Baron d'Roye cared far more for her than for the magical Egg and the future of Markovy. "How could I forget?"

"Please, my love. I will be back as quick as I can." She had no intention of leaving her knight alone in the Rift — not for long anyway. "Just watch over the Egg while I am away."

He looked at her intently, no longer insulted, grinning instead, saying, "You really do love me."

"Of course," she replied, "I never tried to hide it. You were merely slow to notice."

D'Roye shook his head ruefully. "*Mademoiselle* must be wary, for love is a very dangerous thing."

Again she was *Mademoiselle* — he never called her Katya. "As dangerous as sneaking up on Tartars?"

"Easily," he laughed.

"How so?" To her, love seemed nothing but good. Her only heartache came from the fear he might not love her.

Drawing her closer, he stroked her cheek with his finger. "Because you love with all your heart."

"Is that wrong?" she asked, kissing his finger.

"No," he told her, "love is never wrong, but it is dangerous. For that is how we are hurt." He guided her lips to his, and kissed her, a long lingering kiss that turned her mouth inside out.

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When he started to draw back, she would not let him, pulling him back with her hand. "Wait, do not stop. I am not done." He kissed her harder, more passionately, until Katya thought she would burst with joy. Saying that was enough, she whispered, "Wait here. I will be back as soon as I can — maybe with food."

"And wine — if *Mademoiselle* can find it."

She nodded happily, stripping down to her silk shift to move easier, then setting off. Tartars drank fermented mare's milk — but she had not the heart to tell her knight that. Following the Zog upstream over pebbles and bare rock, she walked in the water when she came to dirt or sand, to keep from leaving tracks. Luckily there was no wind now — trying to sneak up on dire wolves with a wind at your back was sheer suicide. Flitting ahead of her was the firebird, letting her count on some warning at least.

At a patch of big boulders the flame jay left the stream, flying from rock to rock, headed toward the far bluffs. She decided to follow the bird, rather than blunder on alone upstream, where thirsty and hungry things might be waiting. Moving quick as she could over the boulders, she leaped from one to the next, running along their backs.

Topping a low ridge, she caught sight of the Tartar parasail and froze, whispering her spell. All she saw was the parasail, and not the sky-boat beneath it, but she knew it marked the Tartar camp. Dropping down behind the nearest rock, she began to work her way forward between the boulders, stopping every so often to vanish and listen. Nothing. Without birds and squirrels the Rift could be deathly still. Then as the rock field thinned, she spotted the Tartar sentry, lying prone atop an outcropping. She would not have seen him at all, but the firebird flew close by him and he looked up.

She froze. He wore one of those weird Tartar caps with big ear flaps, and he followed the firebird's flight with his eyes, then turned back to slowly sweeping the area downstream, looking from one line of bluffs to the other, then back again. His gaze passed over her, and as soon as he was looking away, she moved, running lightly forward, then freezing when his head turned back toward her. It was like a game she played as a girl, one of her favorite memories from her childhood in the settled lands. One of the bigger boys would turn his back, and let the little kids try to sneak up on him. Whenever he spun about you had to freeze, or go back to where

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you started if he caught you moving. She nearly always won, but had never expected to play the game against a sharp-eyed archer who would shoot her if she slipped.

Flitting from boulder to boulder, the firebird caught his attention, drawing his gaze away from the deadly game of dare base. She ran the last little bit, freezing against a boulder below and behind him. He must have heard her, because he spun about, looking straight at her. They stared at each other, then he turned and went back to sweeping the lower Rift, ignoring the flame jay's antics.

Safely past the sentry, she slipped through the last of the boulders, coming on a wide clear space with a spring-fed pool at the lower end. Two yurts and the sky-boat sat on a raised bank beyond the pond. She could see straight into their camp, except for a few spots hidden by the last of the rocks. There were no dogs and only the horselines were guarded. There was no guard at all on the sky-boat, which swayed slightly above the ground, held down by silken lines.

While she stood watching, two bowmen emerged from one of the yurts, carrying buckets, followed by a woman carrying a cloth bundle. Even from a distance, Katya could tell the woman was no Tartar, since she had a long blonde braid and walked like a Markovite, Tartars being notoriously bowlegged. All three of them walked down to the edge of the pond, where the men deposited their buckets and headed back toward the yurt, leaving the woman to wash and draw water.

Katya waited until the men were back in the yurt, and the horse guards were looking the other way. Then she walked calmly down to where the woman knelt by the pond, filling a bucket. Looking up, the woman started, nearly spilling her pail; looking pretty, but harried, with keen blue eyes and cupid's bow lips. "What are you doing here?"

Katya nodded toward the Tartar camp, "Spying on them."

"Good luck." The blonde woman laughed, and went back to filling her bucket. "Where did you come from?"

"Markov, from the royal palace. Prince Ivan himself sent me to see what these Tartars are up to." Since she had to claim some authority, it might as well be the highest.

"Six-year-old Prince Ivan?" Setting aside her full bucket, the woman sounded skeptical.

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"That is him. I am his older sister." She proudly made herself a princess.

Scooping up another bucket, the woman began to fill it. "Forgive me, your highness, for not bowing. But as you see, I am already on my knees."

Letting the lese majesty pass, she asked, "Are you Markovite?"

"No, I am a Pole." Finishing that bucket, the Pole swiftly picked up the next. Even the presence of a princess did not tempt her to slow.

"You speak very well for a foreigner." Her own knight had a dreadful French accent, which Katya found charming.

"I have a good ear for languages." Seizing the final bucket, the blonde woman started to fill it.

Katya asked, "What are you called?"

Watching her bucket fill, the Pole shrugged round strong shoulders. "Tartars call me Borte, which means Blue-Eyes."

"Charming." The young Pole did have big round blue eyes, which must have pleased the Tartars.

"Actually, Borte means Blue-Eyed Wolf Bitch," the blonde admitted, "but I usually leave off the bitch part."

"But you must have a birth name."

Blue-Eyes shook her head, "If I hear it said, I may start to cry. Borte must do for now."

Men emerged from the nearby yurt, calling out in Tartar. Horse line guards looked her way, and Katya froze, whispering her spell. Tartars came striding over — the same two who led the woman to the pond — wearing leather armor and worried looks, glaring about with their bows strung. One said a few curt words to Blue-Eyes who looked about in surprise, then mumbled a reply in Tartar. Slinging their bows, the Tartars picked up the full buckets and carried them back to the yurt. When they reentered the yurt, and the horse guards looked away, Katya relaxed and reappeared. Looking up from her washing, Blue-Eyes seemed more amused than shocked. "So, you are back."

Nodding toward the nearer yurt, Katya asked, "What did they say?"

"They asked who I was talking to," replied the Pole, starting to pound her wash.

"What did you tell them?"

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Chuckling, the blonde beat blue Tartar pants on a rock. "To myself apparently."

"And they believed you?" Everything she had seen of the Tartars said they were lethally smart.

"They think I am a little crazy." Wringing out the pants, Blue-Eyes stared at her. "You are real, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. Very real," Katya assured her. "You may touch me if you like."

Blue-Eyes went back to her washing. "Well, you come and go, claiming to be a princess. And I am a little crazy."

Studying the horse line guards, Katya asked, "What are the Tartars like?"

Without looking up from her washing, Blue-Eyes considered the question. "They are men, only more so. And smart, devilishly smart, smart enough to get along without women. Their women run the camps and herds at home, so their men can go where they please, taking what they want. If you are what they want, they treat you well — but give them the least trouble and they will kill you, figuring there are more where you came from."

Katya shuddered. "That must be horrible."

"Very." Without looking up, the blonde woman told her, "I was part of a wedding party, bridesmaid for my cousin who was marrying a handsome Markovite landgraf. On the way to the wedding we were ambushed by Tartars. All the men were killed, along with the bride's mother and grandmother. Then they went through the younger women, killing the ones they did not want. I was spared because I am pretty and I speak several languages. You would do well to develop some useful talent, unless you mean to survive on sex alone."

"Besides turning invisible?" Katya asked, hoping not to have to please the Tartars at all.

"Oh, no. They will love that." Blue-Eyes looked up to see if she was still there. "They like anything new and useful. And they will see plenty of uses for you."

No doubt. She hoped the Tartars would not see her at all. "How long will they be here?"

"Not long," Blue-Eyes guessed, spreading out her wash on the rocks.

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"There is no grass for the ponies. They are only here to meet the sky-boat, which has something important aboard."

"What?" Katya looked at the sky-boat, tethered to the ground on the far side of the yurts. Up close, she saw the light boat-shaped hull had four big wheels, so it could be hauled like a wagon when the parasail was deflated. "What is important enough to bring them to this forsaken place?"

"Something, or someone they took from your people. Tartars are incredibly smart." Blue-Eyes shook her head, "Way smarter than our men. Before going to war they like to know everything about their enemy — all his strengths, all his weaknesses. What he wears, what he eats, what he fights with, how many warriors he has, how many horses. Where they can find water and pasture. Whatever might prove useful." Katya understood, being here on the sly herself. Most Markovites thought it a mortal sin just to learn a strange tongue, and were far more worried about avoiding foreign heresy than getting to know their neighbors — much less their enemies.

"And when Tartars come in earnest, they want people with them who know the land or speak the language; corrupt lordlings, disgruntled exiles, kidnapped peddlers, or just women who are good with languages." Laying out the last of her wash, Blue-Eyes bid her good-bye and went back to her yurt, leaving Katya standing by the pond, wondering what to do next. So far she had neither food, nor any notion of what the Tartars were doing here.

At least there were no dogs. Setting out toward the sky-boat, she worked her way between the yurts, playing hide and seek with the guards at the horse lines, vanishing when they looked her way. Men were talking in the yurts, and Blue-Eyes sang as she worked. Horses snorted at her, but no men saw her, though a couple looked straight through her, wondering what spooked the horses. One of the Tartar horses was wearing Prince Sergey's silver-studded saddle, not a good omen, but Katya could not tell exactly what it meant. She finished up standing beneath the sky-boat, listening for signs of life in the wheeled hull swaying overhead.

Not a sound. Anyone aboard had to be asleep. Seeing a light silk ladder hanging from the stern, she guessed the last man off had left it hanging for when they returned. As soon as the horse guards were not looking, she swarmed up the ladder and slipped over the rail.

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Freezing as she hit the deck, she saw no one between her and the deckhouse — which was good, since deck space was so limited she would have landed in the man's lap. She surveyed the silk and bamboo deckhouse, seeing no sign it was occupied. No one came out to see who rocked the boat. She put her ear to the paper door. Nothing came from within but the strong smell of incense. Lifting the latch string, she slid back the door, deciding anyone inside had to be asleep.

Or dead. Laid out on silk cushions was the corpse of Prince Sergey, looking very good for someone who had been dead almost a week. Dressed in a royal silver and blue robe, Prince Sergey seemed like he was sleeping, except for the puncture wounds on his neck where the were-leopard had bit down, snapping his spine. Someone had thoughtfully sewn the wounds closed, making the battered prince more presentable.

One look was all she needed. Katya had seen the leopard clamp down on Prince Sergey's pompous neck, and thought "good riddance" — never wanting to see His Highness again, alive or dead. Now here he was again, where he had absolutely no right to be, aboard a Tartar sky-boat deep in the Rift. Not wanting to know what the Tartars meant to do with the prince's body, she slid the paper door closed, and turned to go.

Too late. She felt the boat rock gently beneath her — someone was coming aboard. Resisting the impulse to freeze, she realized there was too little room on the tiny deck — anyone who boarded would be right on top of her. Corpse or no, she had to hide in the cabin. Sliding back the paper door, she slipped inside, closing it behind her just as a man's hand topped the rail. Crawling around to the head of the corpse, she flattened herself against the silk cabin wall, pulling a couple of big feather cushions on top of her. Hidden from sight and feel, she whispered her spell and waited.

First into the cabin was a Tartar shaman, looking like Death done up for a dance, wearing a necklace of monkey skulls, long wild hair, and a white smoke-stained robe — white being the color of death in Black Cathay. His face was painted like a woman's and his cheeks were scarred to keep his beard from growing. Sitting down cross-legged before the corpse, the shaman began a shrill keening chant, so high-pitched that he might really have been a woman. Or a castrated priest. But then what were the facial scars for, if not to curb his beard? Thankfully, her witch's rune kept the he-she from sniffing her out.

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Behind the sexually ambiguous shaman came two hard-eyed Tartar officers wearing steel caps and leather breastplates, who seated themselves at either side of the door — the senior one wore a tunic trimmed with sable, showing he was a division commander, and the younger one wore the red fox trim of a regimental commander. Last of all came Blue-Eyes who sat beside the shaman at the feet of the corpse, setting out a sheep's shoulder blade heaped with incense.

Heart hammering, but otherwise still, Katya lay watching through a crack between the cushions as the shaman burnt yet more incense, going on with the shrill chant. From time to time he would give falsetto instructions to Blue-Eyes, who rose and anointed Prince Sergey's eyes, ears, and mouth with a mixture of mare's milk, Cathayan spices, and fresh sheep's blood; coming so close that Katya could smell the heady spices, even through the thick incense. As the keening rose to a crescendo, Katya's skin crawled. This was necromancy, blackest of the black arts, used to invite in ghosts, ghouls, and night walkers. She had seen the Bone Witch do it, hobnobbing with the dead and near dead on Halloween nights. Never her favorite sort of magic.

What happened next made her like it even less. Prince Sergey's corpse responded to the chant, slowly lifting its head, as if trying to see who was wailing away at his feet. Seeing that badly chewed head rise up next to her nearly shocked Katya out of her spell. It took all her concentration to keep still as the dead Grand Duke bent at the middle and sat bolt upright. With no neck bone to support it, His Highness's head hung to one side, but that did not stop him from speaking. "What the devil are half-breed barbarians doing in my bedroom?

Bowing their heads slightly, both Tartars politely introduced themselves, and Blue-Eyes translated, "This is Kaidu, noyan of the Forest Tumen, and Mangku his van minghan commander. I am called Borte."

Unable to do more than blink and breathe, Katya lay listening to the dead prince's reply. "Tell these unbaptized apes they are squatting before Prince Sergey Mikhailovich, Grand Duke of Ikstra, Baron Suzdal, and uncle to Crown Prince Ivan."

Blue-Eyes said a few words to the noyan in Tartar, then turned back to the pompous corpse. "Kaidu wishes to know what could bring your august personage to this poor humble woodland."

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"Does he?" asked Prince Sergey. "Well, it is hardly his concern, is it? Damned impudent, even for some squint-eyed chimp in armor."

"Nonetheless, he wants to know. You are dead," Blue-Eyes reminded the prickly deceased. "And the dead speak only the truth."

"Every idiot knows I came here to secure the Firebird's Egg."

After a few curt words in Tartar, Blue-Eyes asked, "Why is the Firebird's Egg so important?

His Highness scoffed at their ignorance, "The Firebird's Egg is the luck of the Mikhailovich Kings, Markovy's greatest treasure. It is what makes us invincible, able to pummel brainless barbarians like these."

Blue-Eyes conferred with the Tartars, then asked, "So long as you have this Egg you believe you cannot be beaten?

"Whoever holds the Egg is invincible," declared the corpse. "Dare come against us, and dogs will defecate on your graves."

Kaidu smiled and nodded, thanking Sergey for the warning, then he had Blue-Eyes ask, "Where is the Firebird's Egg now?"

"Stolen," Prince Sergey hissed, "taken by a traitorous heretic and a treacherous witch girl."

Blue-Eyes asked, "Which traitorous heretic?"

"Sir Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile and baron of France, the former Castellan of Byeli Zamak."

"And what treacherous witch girl?"

"How would I know her name?" Sergey snorted. "The one that goes invisible."

Katya saw the Pole's blue eyes go wide, but her voice did not falter. Hearing her translation, the Tartars leaned closer, asking soft questions. Blue-Eyes pretended ignorance, "What do you mean invisible?"

"Transparent, not there, gone as glass. I did not believe it myself until I saw her disappear."

Blue-Eyes dutifully translated, and the question came back, "Where are they now? The knight, the Egg, and the invisible witch girl?"

"How should I know?" asked the indignant corpse. "These questions are tedious. Having monkeys for mothers does not make you amusing."

"You are dead, and need not be amused," Blue-Eyes replied, "you must merely answer truthfully." Despite his bluster, the princely corpse was clearly the shaman's puppet, called back to answer questions with no

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will of his own. And the questions kept coming. Having failed to find the Firebird's Egg did not mean the Tartars were finished. They wanted to know all about young Prince Ivan. Was he well? Did the boy show promise? Which boyars were most likely to betray him? What was the strength of the royal Horse Guards? How many horsemen could each boyar muster? Which would be open to bribes? Did any have weaknesses for drink or women? Or pretty young eunuchs? Endless questions and heavy incense eventually put Katya to sleep.

She awoke with a start, instantly visible. Luckily she was alone, unless you counted the corpse. Prince Sergey's Tartar interrogators had left, taking Blue-Eyes with them. Dawn light showed through the silk walls, and Katya guessed she had slept through most of the short summer night. Prince Sergey looked none the worse for his interview — in fact the act of sitting up and answering questions had infused him with a weird lifelike glow, putting a flush in his cheeks, though it had done nothing for his glazed eyes and severed spine. Easing past the prince, she opened the paper door a crack.

First light filtered into the cabin. Looking out, she found no one aboard, and the camp beyond asleep, aside from a pair of nodding guards on the horse lines. She slid down a silk line to the ground, keeping the sky-boat between her and the horse guards. As quickly as stealth allowed, she crossed the camp and skirted the pond. Blue-Eyes had taken in her laundry, but lying by the pond was a bundle containing cooked millet, dried fish, and a jar of *kumiz*, fermented mare's milk, all left for her — probably at dusk, because during the night a female leopard had come down to drink, and wet pug marks showed she sniffed the bundle before heading deeper into the Rift. Make that a were-leopard.

Clutching the gift from Blue-Eyes, she set out running, straight back the way she came, only slowing to slip past the Tartar sentry. Running atop the boulders, she headed downstream toward where she had left her knight, hoping he had waited for her. Gone far longer than she had intended, she was returning with terrible news. Katya did not have to be a seeress to know these Tartars would soon be looking for them; Prince Sergey had practically dared the nomads to find the Firebird's Egg, or face humiliating defeat.

Even before she reached the river, Katya felt she was being watched.

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Looking over her shoulder, she saw nothing, but that meant little. Hearing the firebird's warning behind her, she shifted direction, heading straight downwind. When she found the right rock, she froze against it and waited.

Within seconds a lycanthrope slipped past her, shaped like a man, but with wolf's fur covering his body, and a beast's hairy face and hideous fangs. Unable to see or smell her, he moved off downwind quickly, trying to catch up with his quarry. She let him get ahead of her, then turned downstream again, running as fast as she could. When he realized he had lost her, the lycanthrope would cast about for her scent, and no doubt find it, but by then she hoped to be with her knight.

She smelled his campfire first, then the horses. There was something so charming and artless about her knight's inability to take precautions. Being a French baron, he naturally assumed he would beat whatever the Rift sent his way, and was lounging about the campfire with his armor off and his sword within reach, wearing just his shirt, hose, and quilted arming jacket. Very fetching. Such serene security was just what her jangled nerves needed, and he had barely said a happy, "*Bonjour*," before Katya was in his arms, hugging him as hard as she could — his welcoming kiss was as wonderful as she remembered. Her knight asked, "What has happened, *Mademoiselle*? Have you missed me so much?"

"More," she told him, "much more. It was horrible. There are two yurts of Tartars looking for us, with a he-she shaman and a talking corpse. And a lycanthrope too, though not with the Tartars." He just meant to murder and eat her.

Her knight sounded confused by the summation. "What talking corpse?"

"You know him, Prince Sergey — the one bitten by the leopard. But there was a woman too, a live one who gave me this." She showed him the bundle Blue-Eyes left her.

"Umm, millet." He looked over her shoulder into the bag. "I am almost hungry enough to eat it."

"There is fish as well," she told him, burying her head in his chest, feeling on the verge of tears.

"And what is in the jar?"

"Wine," she answered weakly, afraid to tell him *kumiz* came from a horse.

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"Wine? Really?" He grinned down at her. "Oh, wondrous wood sprite, what would I do without you."

That was what she most wanted to hear, that he needed her, because she so very much needed him. "We are in desperate danger, and must make for the Iron Wood — before the Tartars discover we are here." These Tartars terrified her. Avoiding Baron Boris's hapless horde of serfs, Horse Guards, washerwomen and charcoal burners was hard enough, but the Tartars were deadly efficient, flying through the air, keeping keen watch, kidnapping Prince Sergey's corpse, then turning it into a talking puppet. She had barely gotten out of their camp alive — and only because their wolves were away, aside from the Blue-Eyed Bitch.

Her knight tried the "wine," declaring it, "Sweet, but with a bite. Why is it so milky white? What grape does it come from?"

"You do not want to know." She pulled him toward the horses, saying, "Come, we must be going." She had to get them out of the open Rift, into the relative safety of the Iron Wood, where they had only ghouls and werewolves to worry about. Her knight complied, donning his armor and saddling his charger, happy to have the spiked mare's milk, which made his kisses even more sweet and intoxicating.

Heading for the near bluffs, she kept looking back, expecting to see Tartars on their trail. But the bouldered Rift was bare behind her, and she saw nothing overhead but a pair of wild rocs, circling between her and the sun — to think she used to be afraid of them. Her knight told her, "I too missed you. And feared for you too, when you did not return by nightfall."

She shivered, thinking how she spent the night sleeping next to Prince Sergey. "I was safe enough. Safer than now in fact." She glanced back over her shoulder, seeing nothing but sand and rock. "They did not know where to look for me." But soon they would be sweeping the lower Rift looking for her and the Firebird's Egg. Prince Sergey had come back from the grave to botch things one last time, exposing her secrets, and setting the Tartars on her.

"*Mademoiselle* need fear nothing while I am at her side." His helmet off, he smiled over at her, looking impossibly brave and handsome. "Baron Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile, is your champion. I have sworn to see you safe through this quest, pledging my life and honor for my lady's safety."

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That was what she feared most, that he would give his life protecting her. She asked shyly, "Am I truly your lady?"

His grin widened. With his helmet off, she could see his fashionable pudding bowl haircut getting long in the back. Life on the run played havoc with your coiffure. "You are my lady, you are my love. How could you ever doubt it?"

"You are married to someone else," she reminded him, "your wife in France."

He laughed, "Having a wife in France has nothing to do with love. Marie married in order to be Baroness d'Roye, not out of any fondness for me. Why should I love her for that? I love you for your beauty and your courage, and for your deep and loving heart. I have known no other woman who...."

She never found out what made her so singular. "Katea, katea," came from the firebird, and she looked back over her shoulder. This time they were there. Dire wolves, an entire pack, coming silently over the rocks behind them.

Pointing them out to her knight, she told him, "That means Tartars. We must get up that draw ahead, and into the Iron Wood, before they catch us in the open."

Urging their horses to run, they sped for the notch in the bluffs, a steep bouldered side canyon leading up to the dense line of dark metal trees. Glancing back, she saw the first of the Tartars, a dozen men and more than three score horses, each rider having several remounts, letting them run down any quarry — when not at war, Tartars killed fast, fierce animals to stay in practice. Katya and her knight had only their sumpter horse, bearing the precious Egg buried deep in the pack saddle, wrapped in tapestry and a spare coat of mail. At the rate they were gaining, the Tartars would soon be in bow range. She showed them to her knight, saying, "We have to get up that gully and into the Iron Wood." There the dense metal trees would nullify Tartar arrows and numbers.

At the base of the gully, the first arrows arched toward them, falling short, but not by much. As the ground rose up, their horses slowed, while the Tartars raced over the rocky flats, firing as they came. Arrows began to land between them — flight arrows, getting lift from their broad heads and long tail feathers. As the gully narrowed, Katya dodged between

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boulders, leading the sumpter horse, while her knight brought up the rear, his armor being proof against the light flight arrows.

Suddenly the line in her hand snapped taut, as the sumpter horse stumbled and went down. Reining in, she looked back and saw the palfrey had been hit in the hind leg. Another arrow hit the fallen horse in the belly. A third shaft struck the pack saddle. And inside that pack saddle was the Firebird's Egg. She had to go back for it.

Turning her mare about, she headed back down the gully — meeting her knight who was pounding up the draw, headed the other way. As they shot past each other, he twisted in the saddle, calling to her, "Katya, come back!" — the first time he had ever called her by name.

With her name ringing in her ears, she reined in beside the downed sumpter horse. Fortunately the horse had not fallen on the side holding the Egg, since she never could have lifted the beast. Tearing at the pack saddle straps, she struggled to untie them and get at the Egg. As she tugged at the straps, an arrow buried itself in the leather saddle inches from her hand, another nicked her shoulder, tearing her shift without drawing blood.

Suddenly her black mare gave a horrible shriek. Hit in the neck, the horse collapsed almost on top of her, thrashing and struggling, kicking up dust and pebbles. Panicked, she pulled harder on the straps, aiming to snatch up the Egg and disappear.

Before she could, a mailed arm came down around her waist, lifting her into the air. Her knight had come back for her, reining in his armored charger next to her fallen mare, then scooping Katya up onto his saddle. "Wait," she gave a startled shout, "we must get the Egg."

"No time," her knight told her. Arrows rattled off his armor as he turned again to head back up the gully, aiming for the iron trees at the top. Her knight had abandoned their quest, choosing her over the Firebird's Egg.

Aghast at the loss of the Egg, Katya clung to her knight's armored body as they pounded up the rocky draw. By now Tartars at the base of the gully were firing heavy armor-piercing arrows, and in seconds the fast-riding horse nomads would come swarming up the ravine after them. An arrow hit the charger's leather-armored rump, making the big warhorse squeal horribly. Another arrow hit the horse, and another. Katya could not understand how she had not been hit — the Bone Witch had to be watching over her.

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At the top of the draw the wounded stallion lurched and staggered, eyes aflame and nostrils flaring in agony. Ahead, Katya saw the first of the iron trees, but knew they would never make it. Hit repeatedly, the overloaded horse fell in an armored heap, flinging Katya to the ground. Hard flinty earth slammed into her, scraping her skin and making her head ring. She fetched up against a big boulder, giving her some protection against arrows, or being trampled by overeager pursuers.

First on his feet, her knight turned to meet the nomad charge, swinging his hideous Lucerne hammer with both hands. Here at the top of the draw, the gully was so narrow only one rider could come at him at a time — nor could the nomads below get a clear shot at him, with their fellows in the way. Tartars had to take on Baron d'Roye one at a time, and hand to hand.

Which proved impossible. No leather-armored Tartar stood a chance against the Swiss-forged blades of his Lucerne hammer. Curved steel sliced through wicker shields and studded leather like they were parchment and linen, inflicting ghastly wounds and pulling riders from the saddle. Light Tartar lances glanced off his armor, and the nomads never got close enough to use their short deadly scimitars and Khyber knives. Riderless horses bolted past him, or went down beneath the bright sharp hammer, tumbling back into the gully to land in a thrashing pile atop their former masters. More Tartars kept coming, until the top of the defile was jammed with dead and wounded, forcing the men struggling up from behind to dismount, and be hewn down on foot.

Katya saw a single arrow arch overhead, whistling as it went. At the top of its arc the whistling arrow exploded in a bright flash, leaving a puff of black smoke hanging in the blue above. As the feathered tail of the arrow fluttered down, the attack ceased. No more Tartars came scrambling over the grisly barricade of fresh corpses and dead horses. Eerie silence descended, broken only by high-pitched neighing from a wounded horse. Her knight looked anxiously about, until he saw her flattened against the boulder. Smiling, he signed for her to stay down, starting toward her.

Heavy armor-piercing arrows arched over the barricade, falling silently out of the sky like iron hail. Pressed against the boulder, Katya was hard to hit, but her knight was caught in the open. Hit in the shoulder, he

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staggered and spun about, dropping his war hammer, then losing his balance as another arrow pierced his armored hip.

Seeing him fall, Katya dashed to his side, sprinting through the deadly hail. Looping her arm under his good shoulder, she dragged him into the lee of a dead horse. Arrows continued to fall, most hitting the ground behind them, with a couple thudding ominously into the horse they were huddled against. They would not be safe until they reached the iron trees, so she tried to draw the arrow out of his hip. Luckily, armor piercing arrows had sharp hard points that came out as easily as they went in. His hand came up and stopped her, "No, my love, you must go."

She shook her head. "I have to get you to the trees." Glancing up, she searched for a gap in the falling arrows, trying to gauge the right moment.

He pulled her hand to his lips, saying, "I will never make it, but you must live." Looking down she saw life oozing out of his shoulder, and knew he would not get up. Tears burned her eyes as he kissed her hand, calling her Katya again. "Katya, sweet Katya, I love you so. I only held back from fear of hurting you — and now I have." He kissed her hand again, then let go, pushing her away, "Run, my love, please run. Please save yourself."

Unable to speak, she leaned down and kissed him on the lips, then she turned and ran, dodging through the falling arrows, not wanting to watch her knight die.

Firebird

SQUIRMING BETWEEN metal trunks, Katya heard arrows rattling the iron branches, but none found their way down to her. Safe for the moment, she hung her head and cried, crawling on hands and knees between the trees. She had lost her love, her sweet, handsome caring knight, as well as the magical Firebird's Egg that was the hope of Markovy. Both taken by Tartars. She remembered Blue-Eyes's story of the massacred wedding party; how the Tartars casually crushed those people's lives just to get a few useful captives and trivial information. Now the horse nomads had destroyed her life as well, treating settled people the way boyars treated serfs, as mere things to be used or discarded. She ached for her

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simple life in the woods, where the Bone Witch had protected her — but the Bone Witch too was dead.

Hurt and sorrow welled up inside her, thinking of all that her knight had done for her. His jokes, his strange tales of the wide world beyond the trees, his gentle touch, and passionate kisses that promised more. Now there was no more. No knight, no Egg, nothing. Her life had become a useless husk, holding only pain and loss. And she could not even just lie down to die; for if she did the Tartars and their wolves would find her — then things would get even worse. Hearing water ahead of her, she crawled toward it, hoping to hide her trail. Most Markovites had a superstitious fear of the Iron Wood, with its witches, ghouls, troll-bears and were-beasts; but to Katya it was a second home, far less strange than the settled lands. Usually she much preferred the living wood — with its food, warmth, and hundreds of friendly eyes — though right now the metal wood's cold, bleak lifelessness matched her misery.

She found the stream, a small feeder headed down toward the Rift, and crawled along in it, adding her tears to water that would flow into the Zog. After a couple of hundred paces the wood thinned, and Katya could stagger upright without getting spiked by low branches. She sloshed along searching for a good place to leave the stream. Usually she looked for an overhanging tree, or a grassy bank that would not take prints, but here the branches could not be climbed, and the banks were rock or dirt. Smelling a troll-bear's lair, she instinctively froze, feeling caught between Tartars trailing her and the troll-bear ahead.

Cold water tumbled past Katya's ankles. Why was she even worried? The troll-bear would merely kill and eat her. Tartars would do worse, far worse — they would make evil use out of her, then kill her. Or worse yet, let her live, seeing all the harm they did with the Firebird's Egg. Put that way, there was only one choice, and she went straight on past the troll-bear's lair, not flinching at the gnawed ox bones scattered about, or the half-eaten leopard carcass hanging from a spiked branch. No dire wolf with half a brain would come within a whiff of this place.

And no troll-bear came rushing out to devour her. But as the troll-bear's stench faded, so did her sense of purpose. Where to now? She had been running away from the Tartars — not toward anything. Katya no longer had her quest to guide her, nor the Bone Witch's hut to go home to,

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so where was she headed? Downstream apparently, because that was the way she was going, following her fallen tears. Iron trees thinned, becoming fewer and shorter, and soon she made out white bluffs between their trunks. Somewhere ahead of her the stream followed a gully or ravine back down into the Rift. Did she want to go there? She stopped and considered. Was being in the Iron Wood better or worse than the open Rift? Were lycanthropes and were-leopards worse than Tartars and rocs? Tough choice.

"Katea, katea, katea...." The firebird's warning decided for her, coming from close behind her, a sure sign she was being stalked. Katya headed off at once, splashing downstream and cross-wind, leaving the iron trees, making for the bouldered Rift below. Finding a spot to leave the stream, she headed upwind, running over the rocks to leave as little trail as she could. Coming to a tall boulder, she went up its backside and lay down on top, looking back along her trail. She froze there, whispering her spell.

Minutes passed, and she wondered if the firebird was playing with her, trying to cheer her up by frightening her senseless — just the sort of trick the flame jay would enjoy. But not this time; a lycanthrope came loping along, nostrils flaring, sniffing out her trail. She let the wolfman pass, then slid down the front of the rock and backtracked to the stream, putting the lycanthrope upwind of her, with no trail to follow. Eventually the man-beast would realize what happened and double back, but by then she would be far away.

Finding another good spot to leave the stream, she stripped off her silk shift and sat down naked on a boulder, meticulously drying her feet so as to leave no wet prints. Then she dressed and set off swiftly over the rocks, heading downwind, giving the lycanthrope no trail to follow. Katya kept looking over her shoulder, but saw nothing, letting her breathe easier....

...And ran right into a loop of rope. Dropping silently over her head and shoulders, the lasso snapped tight around her torso. Spinning in surprise, she tried to twist free, but found her arms pinned to her sides.

Atop the nearest boulder stood a grinning Tartar, holding the other end of the taut rope. He had been hiding there, waiting for her, and had either seen her descending the draw, or just guessed that she would use the stream to hide her trail, then double back into the Rift. Either way he had her, so she stopped struggling; it only tightened the lasso.

Leaping happily down off the rock, he coiled the rope to keep it tight,

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talking softly to her in Tartar, acting like he had lassoed a young mare and did not want to spook her. Small chance. She was far beyond being spooked. Too crushed and heartsick to be frightened, Katya thoroughly hated this Tartar, hardly caring what happened to her so long as she saw him dead. Here was one of the men who killed her knight, a hideous nomad who had come from beyond the Iron Wood to murder, rape, or enslave whoever struck his fancy. It would take more than a few kind words in Tartar to quell her anger. But he did not need to know that, so she shyly returned his smile. Nor did he act like a murderer, grinning eagerly, plainly happy to have her, and trying to interest her in talk. He asked her a question in Tartar, and she nodded and smiled wider, as if she understood and agreed. All the time plotting his demise.

He led her down the bouldered draw toward the open Rift, heading downwind, while she kept looking back, working the lasso away from her elbows, up toward her shoulders. They recrossed the stream she had waded down, and ahead she saw a bend in the trail, where the path dipped down a bit, then turned sharply to circle three big boulders. With the wind at their backs, their scent was going straight toward the rocks, and the Tartar was making unnecessary amounts of noise, breathing heavily and brushing the bushes with his bowlegged gait. Like most born horsemen, he did not walk well. From above, the firebird sounded a warning.

Hanging back as they approached the three rocks, Katya kept the rope taut. When he disappeared around the turn ahead, she ran silently toward him, putting sudden slack in the line. Using that slack to loosen the lasso, she slipped swiftly out of the loop. Letting the line drop, she froze against the rocks, reciting her spell. Surprised, the Tartar turned to see what had happened to her, stepped back into sight and stared straight at her, stupidly holding his limp rope. As he stared suspiciously through her, the lycanthrope leaped on him from behind. Leather armor was no match for the lycanthrope's superhuman strength, and the Tartar never even touched his scimitar. In seconds the wolfman was feeding happily on the horse nomad — some parts of Markovy were absolutely unsafe to invade.

Blood lust dulled the were-beast's senses, and the wolfman did not look up as Katya quietly slipped away downwind. What now? Her knight was dead, so was the Bone Witch, and she owed her freedom to one of her direst enemies. Where should she go, besides away from here? Downriver

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to turn herself in to Baron Boris, and be burned for her troubles? Hardly likely. Home to the woods, where she had lived with the Bone Witch? Perhaps, but there was little left for her there, since Prince Sergey had burned the Bone Witch's hut. And she knew now she needed people. She did not want to be a hermit in the woods, with only birds and squirrels to talk to — but which people? No one had been half so appealing as her lost knight. Moving slowly, senses alert, Katya headed downwind, determined to be safe wherever she was going. At least the forest would feed her.

Katya did not see the leopard coming. Despite being extra alert, she did not hear, smell, or sense the were-beast in any way. Nor did the firebird sound an alarm. Without warning the were-leopard sprang from nowhere, landing in front of her, startling her even more than the Tartar noose. Leopards she knew; they should not take her by surprise.

But this leopard changed right before her startled eyes, rising up, becoming upright and losing her spots, turning into a naked old woman, gaunt but strong, with wrinkled features, bone-white skin, and a wild halo of ivory hair — the Bone Witch.

Crying with relief, she threw herself into the Bone Witch's arms, and the witch drew Katya to her withered breasts, stroking and comforting her, saying, "Katya, I told you I would come if you needed me." When Prince Sergey killed her, the Bone Witch came back as a were-leopard to take her revenge, showing how fruitless it can be to fight the undead.

"What am I to do?" Katya begged between sobs, happy to see the Bone Witch, even in this unearthly form.

"Have you forgotten the Egg?" asked the Bone Witch, the same way she used to remind Katya of her chores around the hut. "You must take it to the Nest on Burning Mountain, and when you get there bury it in warm white sand."

"But I do not even know where the Egg is," Katya protested, wanting solace and affection, not more impossible tasks to perform. "Tartars must have it now."

"Indeed they do," the Bone Witch sounded proud of her pupil. "The Firebird's Egg is aboard the Tartar sky-boat. Get it, and I will help you take it to Burning Mountain."

Easy for the Bone Witch to say, being already dead and beyond most normal worries. Katya asked, "How will you help?"

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"You will see," replied the Bone Witch, who had enjoyed being mysterious even before she died. Giving her a withered kiss, the witch wiped her tears away, telling her to be brave. Nodding obediently, Katya watched the Bone Witch sink back down and become a leopard again, then slink silently away. At least it sounded like Katya would get to Burning Mountain, and have a chance to put the Firebird's Egg in the sand. So what else could she do? Clearly the Bone Witch had raised her for this, and meant to see it done.

With the Bone Witch watching over her, she decided to head straight for the Tartar camp — which at least had the advantage of surprise, since it was the last thing any sane fugitive would do. With the flame jay's help, she slipped past the sentries. Luckily all the wolves were out looking for her, but Borte, the Blue-Eyed Wolf Bitch, was sitting by her yurt, spinning wool into thread. Busy with her work, Blue-Eyes did not see her until she stepped softly into view. "You?" Blue-Eyes looked up from her spinning, asking in surprise, "What brings you back?"

Katya nodded at the sky-boat. "The Firebird's Egg is aboard that flying ship."

"I know," Blue-Eyes sighed. "They are using it in their magic." From the way the Pole said it, Katya could tell they were using Blue-Eyes too, and the young woman was tired of talking to the dead.

"We must get it from them." Katya found herself sounding like the Bone Witch, whose eerie, otherworldly confidence was contagious.

"Must we?" Blue-Eyes arched an eyebrow. "Not everyone can appear and disappear as they please; some of us must live here all the time."

Unfair, but Katya could see she must be a mystery to Blue-Eyes, coming and going without warning, urging her to betray her masters, risking grotesque punishments. And Katya could disappear with the Egg, but her spell would not cover another person — leaving Blue-Eyes to make painful explanations. Just talking to malicious spirits was a heinous crime. "Well, I am going to try," she told the Pole. "Pray for me."

Blue-Eyes gave a noncommittal nod, and Katya set off on her own, sliding past the horse line guards, vanishing when they looked her way. Get in, get the Egg, and get out — scary, but not impossible. Finding the ladder down, Katya guessed no one was alive on the sky-boat, and quietly climbed aboard. No one on deck. Sliding back the paper door, she peered

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into the cabin, seeing through a haze of incense that Prince Sergey was gone.

Her knight lay in his place, Baron Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile, hands clasped on his sword, his saxe knife still in his belt. He looked so calm, he might have been sleeping, but Katya knew he was dead, lying unnaturally stiff and not breathing. His armor was cut away around his wounds, which were neatly sewn shut, like Prince Sergey's had been. His head was propped up facing the door, with eyes closed, resting on the Firebird's Egg.

Tears welled up as she shut the door behind her, slipping over to his side. Afraid to touch his dead flesh, she cupped her hand over his lips, feeling for breath. Nothing, but his skin had a natural healthy glow, as if he were resting in the quiet space between breaths. She reached down and grasped the Firebird's Egg, finding its leathery skin was warmer than ever, and pulsing with life. Saying a prayer for the dead, she started to pry the Egg loose from under his head; then stopped, staring at the wound on his shoulder, seeing skin had grown back around the stitches. Chills went up her arms and down her back — his wound was healing, faster even than a living man's would. She knew hair and fingernails grew after death, but this could only be caused by the warm, magical Egg pressed against his shoulder.

How could she take the Egg away, when it was healing her love, giving him a semblance of life? By tomorrow he might be warm to the touch, breathing even. She would never know if she took the Egg away. But leaving him and the Egg to the Tartars would not do her knight any good.

While she sat frozen by her dilemma, the sky-boat rocked gently beneath her. Someone was coming aboard. Carefully replacing the Egg, she curled up behind her knight and vanished. Presently the paper door opened, and a blonde head poked in, asking, "Are you here?" Blue-Eyes looked frantically about, whispering loudly, "They are coming!"

There was only one escape. Jerking the saxe knife from her knight's belt, she pushed past the startled Blue-Eyes, going out on deck, where she started slashing at the silk lines tying them to the ground. Blue-Eyes looked aghast, asking, "Are you mad? Just disappear!"

With no time to explain, Katya kept attacking the lines, saying, "Come with me, please."

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"Do I have a choice?" Blue-Eyes asked, as the sky-boat tilted alarmingly, held down on one side, but not on the other. Shouts in Tartar came from below. Scrambling to the opposite rail, Katya began cutting the lines there. Blue-Eyes walked across the tilted deck and released the stern line, then the ladder, right in the face of a surprised and angry Tartar.

Suddenly they were free, lurching off downwind, with Tartar arrows arching after them. Flying free, but not very high nor fast, they drifted low over the Rift, so low they would never clear the bordering bluffs, floating well within arrow range of the mounted Tartars racing after them. She called to Blue-Eyes, "Why are we not flying away?"

"Too heavy," Blue-Eyes shouted back. The sky-boat had two women, an armored body, and the Firebird's Egg. "We have to dump the sand bags."

"Sand bags?" She saw Blue-Eyes upend a bag of sand tied to the rail, spilling it out to lighten ship. An arrow flew between them as Katya leaped to help, grabbing a bag and flipping it over the rail, then cutting it loose, sending the bag with the sand. Anything to get some altitude.

And it worked; with each sand bag emptied or heaved overboard, the sky-boat rose higher, and their pursuers fell farther away to windward. In moments the horse nomads dwindled, reduced to tiny figures riding dwarf ponies. Encouraged, Katya, seized another bag, hauled it over the rail, and cut it free. As she watched the bag fall away, an arrow burst through the light wicker bulwark, hitting her hard in the side, startling her like a blow from a stone.

Shock washed over her, and she stepped back in surprise, staring at the feathered shaft sprouting from her side, barely a hand's span from her navel. There was no pain, and little blood, just a red stain on her shift, slowly growing bigger. She remembered her knight lying at the top of the draw, his life oozing away. Now it was her turn.

"That should do it," Blue-Eyes sounded satisfied, emptying one last sand bag, then turning to her, thrilled to have escaped the Tartars. Seeing the arrow, Blue-Eyes was instantly at her side, holding her up, warning, "Do not touch it!"

Not a chance, she had no intention of handling the arrow, which was starting to hurt alarmingly. Katya could see by the shaft that it was not a slim-pointed armor-piercing arrow, but a broad-headed flight arrow that twisted and turned as it went in, tearing open your insides. She was good

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as dead already. Gently Blue-Eyes laid her down on the deck, bending over her and saying, "This is going to hurt horribly. Can you stand it?"

"Do I have a choice?" she asked weakly, staring up at the huge gas-filled parasail, trying not to look at the arrow.

"That's the spirit." Blue-Eyes gripped the base of the shaft, and the silk shift next to it. "I learned this from Tartars, who know all about arrow wounds." Blue-Eyes started to pull on the shirt, easing the silk out of the wound. "When an arrow hits a loose silk shirt, the point carries it into the wound. If you pull out the fabric, it will bring the point with it, retracing the arrow's path as the silk unwinds, keeping it from doing further damage."

Damage already done to her had Katya on the verge of fainting, and every tug on the fabric hurt like fire. Her hands clutched at the deck, her nails digging into the thin wickerwork as she fought not to move. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back, breathing in short sharp gasps. Finally she did faint, slipping thankfully into a black void—if this was what death was like, then it was not so bad.

When she awoke the bloody arrow lay on the deck beside her, and Blue-Eyes was sewing the wound closed. By now the prick of a needle felt like nothing compared to the fire in her side. Her silk shift was a mess, torn and matted with blood, mixed with yellow medicinal powder. She asked, "Will I live?"

"Possibly." Blue-Eyes would not deign to cheer her up. "At least I certainly hope you do."

So did Katya. Gazing up at the taut black parasail, she asked, "Where are we headed?"

Blue-Eyes shrugged. "Downwind. I assumed you had some plan, some place where you were going."

Burning Mountain, deep within the Iron Wood, but it seemed silly to say that now, flat on her back and bleeding into the wicker deck. She thought of her knight, lying dead in the cabin. "What happened to Prince Sergey?"

"They buried him deep in the Rift, with his eyes, ears, mouth, and anus sewed shut, to keep his spirit from walking."

Katya grimaced, "Sounds ghastly."

"Hideous, I had to do the sewing." Blue-Eyes wiped off her needle and put it away. "Are you thirsty?"

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"Parched." Katya's body cried for the fluids that had spilled out the hole in her side. Blue-Eyes propped her up, which hurt terribly, and held a sweet-smelling clay jar to her lips. She sipped and sputtered, expecting water but getting something startlingly tangy. "What is this?"

"Rice wine." Blue-Eyes encouraged her to drink some more. "It will help with the pain."

She drank until her head got dizzy and her body felt numb. Then she asked for help staggering into the cabin. Blue-Eyes shrugged, "If you want to lie down by a corpse."

"I do not mind," Katya whispered, "he is my knight." Blue-Eyes thought it strange, but all the Pole knew of love was being raped by Tartars. Half-carrying Katya into the incense-filled cabin, Blue-Eyes laid her down beside her knight, covering her with a blanket and a fur-lined Tartar flying jacket, then left, closing the paper door. Laying her head alongside the Firebird's Egg, Katya passed out again.

She did not wake until the morning, when Blue-Eyes brought her wine and millet, saying she had better come on deck. "You must see what is ahead."

Gingerly, Katya tested her side, seeing if she could stand. It hurt, but not enough to keep her off her feet. Lifting her shift, Katya saw angry red flesh closed by Blue-Eyes's neat stitches. Bleeding had stopped, forming a scab—a good sign. Examining her knight's shoulder, she found his wound totally closed, and used his saxe knife to take out the stitches; a foolish gesture, but she could not resist. His skin felt warm to her touch, almost alive. An anxious Blue-Eyes helped her pull on the Tartar flying jacket, and stagger out onto the tiny deck, where the Pole had made herself a bed of cushions and blankets. Looming ahead of them downwind was a huge cone-shaped mountain, rising right in the sky-boat's path. Wisps of white smoke billowed from the flat snow-clad peak, trailing away from them. Katya nodded. "Burning Mountain. It is where we are headed."

"I can see that," Blue-Eyes protested. "What are we going to do about it?"

"We have to figure a way to land," Katya told her. "This is where I mean to go. Atop of that mountain is the Firebird's Nest, and that is where I am taking the Egg."

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Blue-Eyes looked incredulous, "Why, in God's name?"

Why indeed? Despite the pain in her side, she could stand and talk, even think clearly — one night alongside the Firebird's Egg did that. Given a week she would be fine, and the Egg was healing her knight as well. Who knew — it might even bring him back to life? She was sorely tempted to give it a chance. But that was not what the Bone Witch wanted, not with Burning Mountain drawing steadily closer — the witch had promised help getting there, and here it was. Katya desperately wanted to live, and to have her knight back, yet the Egg that was healing him had to return to its Nest. She would not make the mistake King Demitri made, who stole the Egg, thinking he could use the magic for himself and somehow avoid the curse. True, the Egg was healing them, but where had the wounds come from? Her knight had survived numerous losing battles, only to die guarding the Egg. And until now she had never been scratched. Katya told the Pole, "This Egg is the luck of the Markovite kings, but there is a horrible curse on the Egg as well — we must return it to the Nest it was stolen from."

Barely believing what she was hearing, Blue-Eyes hastily crossed herself, just like Katya's knight used to do, muttering. "You Markovites are insane."

"Most likely," Katya agreed, "but do you think you can land me on that mountain?"

Blue-Eyes stared at the fiery mountain drifting toward them on the wind, looking as though she wished she had stayed with the Tartars. "I do not see how we can miss it."

As the mountain bore down on them, they searched for a landing site, selecting a broad tilted snow-field near to the peak, which meant lightening the ship even more. Blue-Eyes began pitching things over the aft rail, and presently called out to Katya, "We have company coming."

Peering upwind, Katya saw what looked like a flock of rocs with thick black wings, but was actually half a dozen Tartar sky-boats coming up behind them. Tartars knew how to tilt their parasails to accelerate as they climbed, so the nomads were gaining even in a straight chase downwind. Fearing they might catch her before she even got to Burning Mountain, Katya went into the cabin to fetch the Egg. Seeing her knight's shoulder nearly healed, she kissed the bare warm flesh, then gently drew the Egg out

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from under his head. "Good-bye, my love," she whispered, "I hope to be with you in the Land Beyond."

Back on deck, Blue-Eyes helped her into oversized Tartar boots and fur-lined leggings, stuffing cloth in the boots to make them fit. Then they strapped the Egg to her belly, as though it were a baby, crossing a long length of cloth over Katya's shoulders and around her middle — the flying jacket went on over it all, making her feel like an Eskimo. With the Egg pressed against her wound, her pain miraculously vanished, and she might actually make it up the mountain if Tartars did not put more holes in her. Glancing back, she saw the nomad parasails were gaining, and she could make out the boat hulls hanging beneath them, but not the men on board.

She looked forward, toward the white-topped peak, finding the ship was level with the snow-field, headed for a bumpy landing. Up close, she saw that the flat peak was a steaming volcanic caldera, ringed with snow and ice, looking like a vast ice-witch's caldron. Boiling Mountain would have been a better name. Hugging the Egg to her belly, she drew hope and strength from its pulsing warmth — until she thought of her knight, who needed that magic as much as she, and started crying again.

Stuffing rice balls and jerky into the jacket, Blue-Eyes helped her over the aft rail, holding onto her arms to steady her. Face-to-face across the rail, Blue-Eyes saw her tears, and asked, "Do you really want to do this?"

No, not at all. She wanted to be with her knight, nursing him back to life — but no one was giving her that choice. Not the Bone Witch. And not the Tartars. "Yes," she lied, "this is the only way."

Looking down, she saw the first of the snow field drifting beneath her, coming closer as the mountain tilted upward. The dark shadow of their parasail slid silently over the dirty snow. Blue-Eyes leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, saying, "Hannah. My name is Hannah."

"Katya," she replied with a teary smile. "They call me Katya."

Jolting to a stop, the sky-boat hit bow-first, plowing into the snow. Blue-Eyes let go of her, and Katya pushed off, falling backward to protect the Egg. She hit hard, rolling over the wet summer snow, finding it not near so soft as it looked — fortunately her big boots and Tartar jacket cushioned her fall. As soon as she let go, the lightened sky-boat lifted off again.

When she looked up, the boat was already drifting away over the snow

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field, with Blue-Eyes at the stern rail, rapidly lightening ship, trying to make it over the mountain's white shoulder. Lying still in the snow she whispered her spell. On her back, staring straight up, hugging the Egg, she could not see the low flying sky-boat, and could not tell if Blue-Eyes had made it or not. If Hannah had made it. No longer a tool of the Tartars, the Pole had reclaimed her name.

Presently the nomad sky-boats appeared, drifting slowly across the sky. She counted five sails, passing almost straight overhead. Where was the sixth? It was too much to hope that it had hit the mountain. Suddenly the sixth one appeared right on top of her, coming in low to search the snow field, examining the spot where their prey had touched down. She saw Tartars leaning over the rail, their breath misting in the cold air, looking for her with dark alert eyes. All they saw was a hole in the snow.

Keeping still, she let her pursuers pass above her, then float away downwind. She counted to nine hundred, slowly, giving them plenty of time to leave. When she was sure it was safe she looked up, seeing nothing, no Blue-Eyes, no Tartars, just white blinding snow, stretching as far as she could see. Somewhere above her beyond the slanted snow field was the Firebird's Nest.

She started out over the wet heavy snow, her oversized Tartar boots leaving big deep prints, a horribly obvious trail, easily seen from the air. Too bad. She was putting herself beyond such worries, climbing a snowclad volcanic peak in the heart of the Iron Wood, hundreds of leagues from food and shelter, with nothing to sustain her but rice balls and jerky. Cold and hunger would find her long before the Tartars. Hugging the Egg tighter, she marveled at how it held her up, taking away her pain — without it she doubted she could even stand, much less slog through wet snow.

Yet slog she did, over white snow field and a gray ash-covered glacier that groaned underfoot as Burning Mountain melted the ice from below. Great gaping cracks split the glacier, forcing her to cross unstable crevasses on tilted blocks of ice and cinder, tall dirty icebergs overlooking steaming craters filled with milky blue acid lakes. Gray glacier gave way to steep cinder slopes dusted with snow, leading up to the cone. Putting one foot in front of the other, she did not stop until she reached the crater top, and looked down into the vast steamy cauldron, feeling Burning

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Mountain's hot sulfurous breath in her face. Below she could see her goal, a steaming acidic green lake bordered by clean white sand, and ringed by fiery wormholes leading down through the basalt to the hot column of magma that made the mountain.

Sitting on a gray rock spattered with yellow crystals, she celebrated by eating one of her rice balls, washing it down with handfuls of snow. Snow, air and rice ball all tasted of sulfur, and above her the Tartar sky-boats were back, circling like vultures. Winding downward through the hot updraft, the sky-boats could maneuver at will, even going upwind. Impressive, but they had to come much closer if they meant to get her.

Descending into the steaming cauldron, she negotiated slopes of slippery black grit and knee-deep volcanic ash, threaded by hot streams of melted snow bright green with algae — the first sign of life she had seen on the mountain. Fumaroles painted sulfur yellow and rust orange sent up roaring columns of searing toxic steam. Every so often one of the bigger vents would belch suffocating ash and poison gas, forcing her to bury her face in her sleeve until she could breathe again. At the bottom lay three steep cinder terraces, each wider than the last, ending in the white beach of shining volcanic sand bordered by colorful heat-loving algae. Clouds of steam wafted off the simmering chlorine-green lake, stinging her eyes and making her head swim.

Kneeling down, Katya dug into the white crystalline sand, hollowing out a warm hole; then she untied the Firebird's Egg, kissed it good-bye, and for the final time slid it into the ground, covering it up with sand. She had done it, returned the Egg to the Nest, completing her impossible quest. Hopefully the Bone Witch was happy.

Pain returned at once, nearly knocking her senseless. Collapsing into a heap on the sand, she lay groaning in agony, surprised at how much it hurt since the wound itself was nearly healed. Felled by pain and fatigue, she did not care to climb out of the crater and hike down the frozen mountain, dodging Tartar sky-boats on the way. She could see them now and then through the steam, vulture-like shadows circling closer. No thanks, unless the mountain really erupted, she was staying right here.

Slipping into a stupor, Katya dreamed she was back in the Bone Witch's hut, the way it was before Prince Sergey burned it, with doves cooing in cool eaves formed by long white mammoth bones. The Bone

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Witch was there with her wild white mane, wearing her child-bone necklace and winding sheet dress, saying, "Well done, Katya, well done."

Katya beamed in her sleep, happy to have done one thing right, despite horribly botching everything else, losing her knight and her life. "I tried."

"I will miss you terribly," the Bone Witch went on, looking fondly for once. "Though you were the death of me, you were a delight at the end of my much too long life."

Fearing the witch was leaving, she asked, "What shall I do?"

"Why, take care, my child." The Bone Witch managed to sound kindly. "Always comfort the weak and dare to do right. Make me proud." With that the Bone Witch did disappear, and Katya slept.

Warm sand shook, as the mountain stirred. She could hardly believe it. What a nightmare. Katya had finally gotten half-comfortable, sound asleep and barely in pain, and now Burning Mountain had started to erupt beneath her. Struggling awake, she rose painfully to all fours, as the chlorine green lake began to boil over, throwing up a thin hot acid rain that burned as it fell. Tartar sky-boats were racing off downwind, clearly having seen their fill.

Cinder slopes heaved around her, and sparks spewed upward, blowing away the acid rain. Glowing strands of lava flew through the air, trailing dark glassy threads that broke off and danced in the updraft. Glad to have her Tartar jacket, Katya shaded her eyes with her sleeve as a magnificent fireball shot into the sky, sending flames streaming in all directions. It was the Firebird, not the little flame jay that guided her and gave warning, but the huge magical bird itself, born in fire, and brighter than a thousand suns. Spreading his shining wings, the Firebird kept Katya from harm as fire fell out of the sky like snow.

Slowly the mountain subsided, shaking stopped, and nature turned quiet, as the newborn Firebird stood over her, bigger than the biggest roc, his rainbow plumage the color of fire; crimson and ruby, blazing yellow, deep purple, lava orange and lightning white, with electric blue plumes around his big golden eyes. His head was next to her, and his long red tongue licked her wound. For a while she just lay there, marveling at the bright huge bird while his healing tongue licked her side. When he was done, the wound had healed and her pain was gone — so were the stitches, plucked out by the bird's sharp bill.

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Rising to her feet, she looked the Firebird full in the face, and he bent down to greet her, begging for affection the way sparrow nestlings did when she held them in her hand, thinking she must be their mother. Reaching up, she stroked him softly, between his big golden eyes. Both she and the Firebird were orphans — but from now on they would have each other, and Katya told him so. "We will face the world side by side, since you are new to it, and I have been there. Together we can make the Bone Witch proud."

He nodded his plumed head, showing he understood, and she saw herself reflected in a gold saucer-sized eye. Her hair had turned bone white in the fire, becoming a wild ivory tangle, just like the Bone Witch must have had when she was young.

Climbing onto the Firebird's broad back, Katya found a spot where she could sit, sheltered by his plumage, with her legs straddling his neck. Leaning forward, she told the young bird to fly, and they took off, spiraling up into the great updraft rising from Burning Mountain — their first time in the air, but both took to it easily. Below black patches stained the snow, broken Tartar sky-boats crashed on the downwind side of the peak, their parasails ignited by the brilliance of the Firebird's eruption. Katya the Bone Witch and the newborn Firebird flew triumphantly over them, winging away in search of her knight.

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CURIOSITIES

AN EAST WIND COMING, BY ARTHUR BYRON COVER (1979)

IN 1979, I was thirteen years old. I'd just recently been bitten by the Sherlock Holmes bug. On one of my weekly book-gathering trips downtown, when I asked a bookshop clerk where I could find the Holmes books, I was handed Arthur Byron Cover's *An East Wind Coming*.

The cover of this Berkley paperback was garish and lurid: a sexy woman lying in a splatter of blood and displayed to show off her cleavage. The futuristic cityscape and the Holmes head in the background helped me overcome my naive embarrassment, as did blurbs such as "IN THE GOLDEN CITY OF THE GODS, THE LEGENDS LIVE."

An East Wind Coming is a decadent smorgasbord oozing sex and nihilism, peppered with the thrills of various pulp fictions and comic-book universes. In a far future the iconic characters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century pop culture have been reborn, all of them referring to themselves coyly as "the consulting detective," "the good doctor," "the Big Red Cheese," etc. Imagine Moorcock's *Dancers at the End of Time* reinvented by a chimera of Kim Newman, Philip José Farmer, and Belgian nihilist surrealist Jacques Sternberg, and you'll get an idea of the strange atmosphere of this dense and mind-warping novel.

An East Wind Coming shares the same setting as the author's excellent 1975 debut, *Autumn Angels*, but outperforms it in scope, nihilistic perversity, gaudy invention, and genrebending glee. Cosmic concepts, depressing sex, horrific crimes, and pulp heroes...what more could you want?

—Claude Lalumière

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If Monty Python, Philip K. Dick, and Franz Kafka had collaborated on a novel, it might have been a lot like ***Snugglarea***. On the other hand, it might have turned out to be something completely different. ***Snugglarea***, in fact, was authored by mild-mannered novelist Dan Weiss. Boldly published by **Black Plankton Press,** ***Snugglarea*** was turned down by some of the tamer houses, who noted it doesn't fit into any pigeonhole. Here at BPP, we let the other guys appeal to the birdbrains. Available to **F&SF** readers for $11.50. Box 1351 Cobb, CA 95426 bplankton@juno.com Make checks payable to **Black Plankton Press.**

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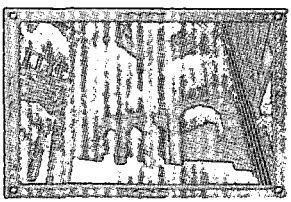

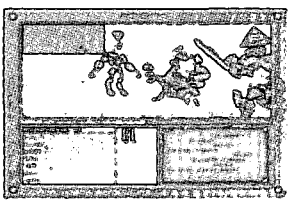

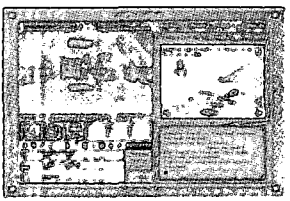

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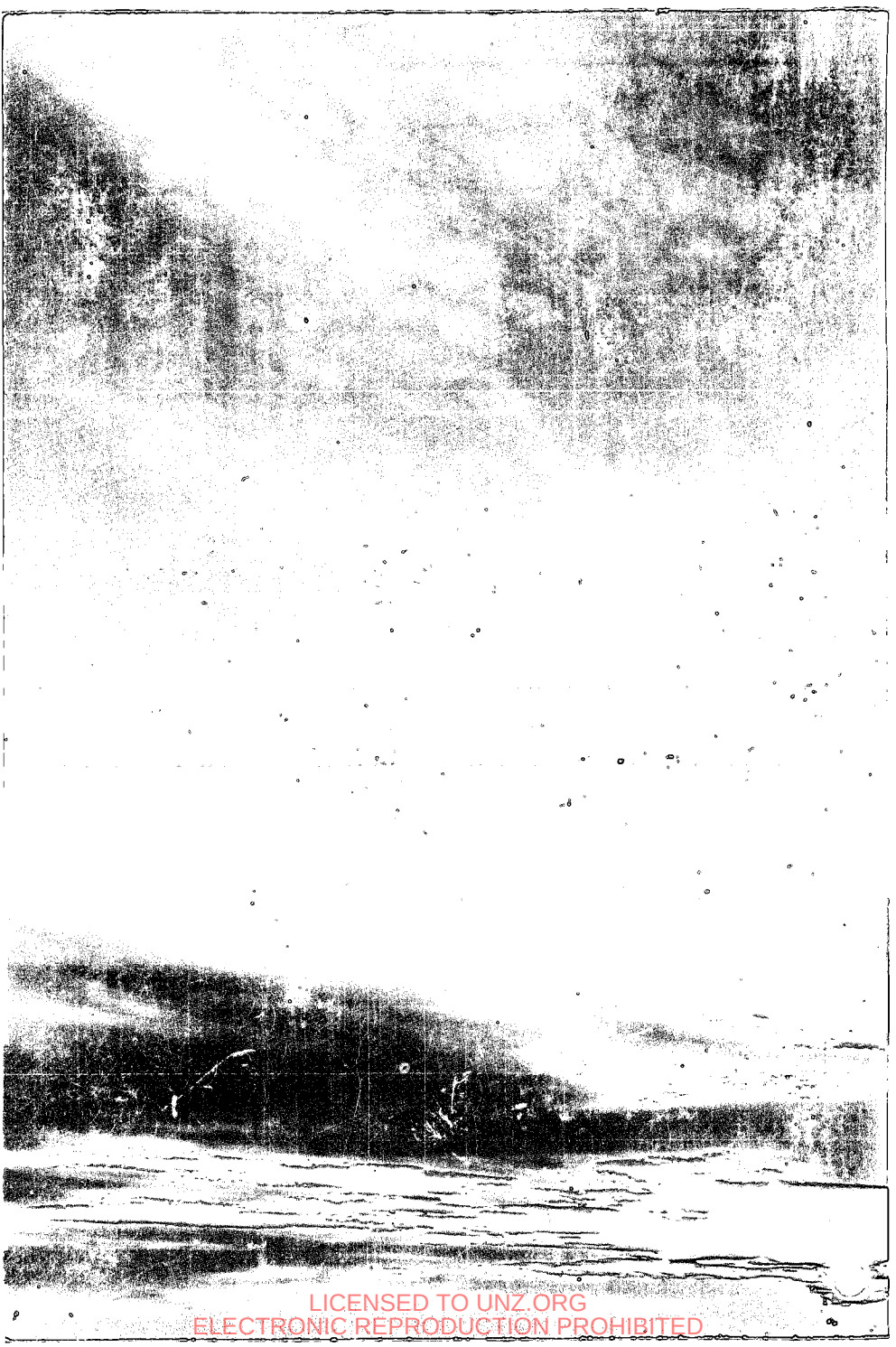

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